ARTICOLO

The Popularization of Chinese Modern Drama: The Birth of Petty Urbanite *huaju* during the Isolated Island Period

Chaoqun Yang, Rosdeen Suboh

Abstract – ITA

L'emergere del huaju dei piccoli urbani durante il Periodo delle Isole Isolate (1937-1941) segnò un momento cruciale nella popolarizzazione del dramma moderno cinese, o huaju. Questa transizione incarna un mix di inevitabilità e casualità nell'evoluzione del huaju. Questo articolo ipotizza che l'ascesa del huaju dei piccoli urbani sia stata alimentata da una complessa interazione di fattori sfaccettati, sistematici e interconnessi. Utilizzando la teoria del diamante culturale (Griswold 2008: 14), l'analisi approfondisce le interazioni dinamiche tra huaju dei piccoli urbani, società, creatori e pubblico, svelando i meccanismi che hanno portato alla nascita di questa forma teatrale unica. I risultati rivelano che la popolarizzazione del huaju cinese – e la corrispondente comparsa del huaju dei piccoli urbani – si è svolta attraverso tre fasi distinte: la fase dell'influenza sociale, la fase dell'influenza umana e la fase della regolazione artistica. Queste fasi sono intrinsecamente collegate e progressive, e nel loro insieme illuminano il meccanismo di fondo che ha portato alla diffusione del huaju cinese.

Abstract – ENG

 The emergence of Petty Urbanite *huaju* during the Isolated Island Period (1937-1941) marked a pivotal moment in the popularization of Chinese modern drama, or *huaju.* This transition embodies a blend of both inevitability and serendipity in the evolution of *huaju*. This paper posits that the rise of Petty Urbanite *huaju* was propelled by a complex interplay of multifaceted, systematic, and interconnected factors. Utilizing the cultural diamond theory (Griswold 2008: 14), the analysis delves into the dynamic interactions between Petty Urbanite *huaju*, society, creators, and audiences, uncovering the mechanisms that led to the birth of this unique theatrical form. The findings reveal that the popularization of Chinese *huaju*—and the corresponding emergence of Petty Urbanite *huaju*—unfolded through three distinct phases: the stage of social influence, the stage of human influence, and the stage of artistic regulation. These stages are intricately linked and progressive, collectively illuminating the underlying mechanism that drove the popularization of Chinese *huaju*.

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Introduction

Since the introduction of drama to China in the early 20th century, the first generation of creators—including Ouyang Yuqian, Ren Tianzhi, and Hu Shi—imbued Chinese *huaju* [1] with a profound sense of social responsibility, advocating ideals such as "drama for the people" and "drama for humanity." For a considerable historical period, *huaju* has often been perceived as an elite cultural form, primarily catering to the upper classes and intellectuals, with its core values rooted in national will and independence. This perception is closely tied to *huaju*'s historical role as a vehicle for national salvation propaganda and the influence of power on art.

However, the evolving social landscape has made the "popularization" [2] of *huaju* not only possible but inevitable. As the public's economic and cultural levels improved and political and market environments stabilized, *huaju* was poised to gain wider acceptance. Notably, this "popularization" of Chinese *huaju* unfolded within the unique context of wartime, where the interplay of inevitability and chance played a crucial role in its transformation, where the interplay of inevitability and chance played a crucial role in its transformation.

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[1] *Huaju*: It refers to the Western-derived form of drama introduced into China in the early twentieth century. The term *huaju*, literally meaning "drama of speech," foregrounds its fundamental difference from the long-established China's *xiqu* (traditional Chinese opera). *Xiqu* is a highly codified composite art that integrates singing, recitation, movement, and combat, and strictly adheres to established conventions of role types, vocal styles, and symbolic performance. By contrast, *huaju* deliberately broke with these traditions, grounding its aesthetics primarily in Western realist drama. The central innovation of *huaju* lay in its use of everyday spoken language as the principal vehicle for narrative and character construction, together with realistic stage settings and psychologically motivated acting, all intended to create for audiences the illusion of lived reality. This sharply distinguished it from the musical and poetic structures and symbolic staging of *xiqu*. Moreover, early practitioners of *huaju* consciously employed the form as a medium for modern narrative, directly engaging with contemporary social issues and the fate of the nation, in contrast to *xiqu*, which typically drew upon historical or legendary materials.

[2] This refers to phenomena or things that are understood, accepted, or familiar to a broader and more general audience. The popularization of Chinese *huaju* means that it has become accessible and appreciated by a wider audience beyond the elite and intellectual classes. During the Isolated Island period, as society developed, a broader segment of the population gained economic and cultural capacity. *huaju* transitioned from serving only the upper classes to catering to a more extensive and general urban audience.

During the Isolated Island period (1937.11.12 - 1941.12.8), while most regions of China were engulfed in warfare, the Shanghai International Settlements, under the temporary control of French, British, and American authorities, acquired a distinctive political status that sustained a condition of relative security and distorted prosperity. The massive influx of population and capital stimulated the development of the urban economy and consumer markets (Li 2015: 78). A sizable urban composed of clerks, merchants, teachers, and other ordinary citizens—endowed with a certain level of purchasing power and leisure time—rapidly took shape (Wang 2018: 56–57). This area, resembling an "isolated island," stood in stark contrast to the turmoil and violence that surrounded it.

It was precisely within this social context that Petty Urbanite *huaju* rapidly flourished—referring to works primarily targeted ordinary urban residents as its main audience and centered on themes closely related to everyday life. Through realist stage aesthetics, it sought to offer a truthful representation of urban experience while responding to the spiritual and emotional needs of the populace. This era witnessed the rise of many outstanding actors, playwrights, and directors in Shanghai's *huaju* scene. *Huaju* became not only a recognized art form within society but also an avenue for commercial profit. The relaxation of political control and the pursuit of commercial interests bridged the gap between *huaju* and the general public (Wu 1997: 30-33), enabling Petty Urbanite *huaju* to genuinely serve the urban class.

The emergence of Petty Urbanite *huaju* marked the growing influence of consumer culture on China's *huaju* development—a phenomenon of unique significance in *huaju* history. However, shifts in social systems and ideologies led to early research on Petty Urbanite *huaju* being insufficiently evaluated and often overlooked, while politically propagandistic *huaju* received more attention for its "progressive"[3] content.

Although research on *Petty Urbanite huaju* has gradually gained attention since the 1980s, following the broader opening of literary and theatrical studies, it remains uneven—constrained by scarce historical materials and the limits of contemporary critical frameworks. Hence, a rigorous inquiry into its origins is essential. By employing the cultural diamond theory, this study systematically examines the interactions among *Petty Urbanite huaju*, creators, audiences, and wider society. It seeks to clarify key moments in the genre's emergence and transformation, thereby offering a deeper understanding of the complex fabric of Chinese *huaju*'s popularization.

Cultural diamond theory

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[3] Progressiveness: This term refers to meeting national political and propaganda needs.

Wendy Griswold's "cultural diamond" theory, proposed in 1993, serves as the central analytical framework of this study. The theory is designed to systematically examine the dynamic relationship between cultural objects and the social world in which they are embedded, with particular attention to the interactive roles of creators, receivers, social contexts, and cultural objects in the processes of cultural production and reception (Griswold 2008: 24).

Although Victoria D. Alexander later expanded this model in *Sociology of the Arts* (2003) by incorporating additional dimensions such as "distributors" (e.g., publishers, galleries, theatres, and other intermediary institutions) and "government/policy," in order to better capture the complexity of contemporary cultural production systems, the original model proposed by Griswold is more explanatory for the ecology of Petty Urbanite *huaju* in Shanghai during the Isolated Island Period. This is because political control within the concessions at that time was relatively relaxed, and cultural production was not dominated by highly institutionalised state cultural policies, but was instead driven primarily by market mechanisms, the demands of urban civil society, and the autonomy of creative practitioners. Consequently, focusing on the direct and active interactions among creators, works, audiences, and social context allows for a clearer articulation of the internal logic underlying the emergence of Petty Urbanite *huaju* within this particular historical interstice. Within the context of the Isolated Island Period, these interactions can be further elaborated as follows (see Figure 1):
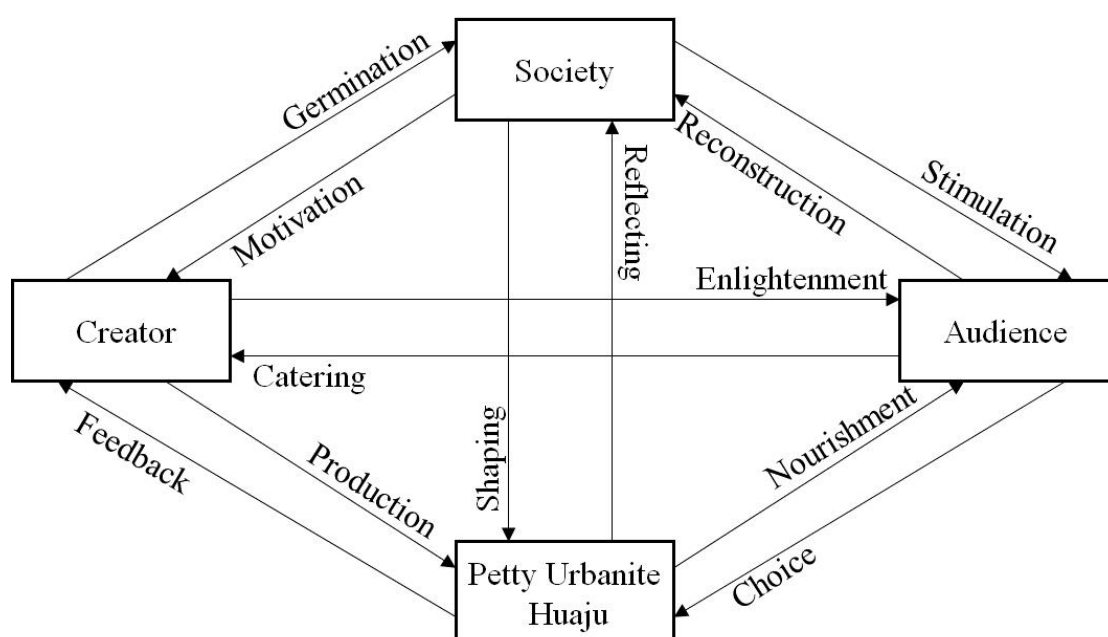

Fig. 1 – Cultural diamond theory

First, the relationship between society and creators constituted a bidirectional dynamic of "motivation" and "germination." The exceptional social environment of the Isolated Island Period not only provided creators with the material conditions for survival and the raw material for artistic production, but also directly stimulated their motivation to respond to market demands. At the same time, driven by both artistic aspirations and commercial imperatives, creators actively explored new cultural concepts attuned to urban tastes, seeking a workable balance between aesthetic pursuit and economic survival. In doing so, they also participated in shaping the cultural market and social aesthetics of the period.

Second, the relationship between society and Petty Urbanite *huaju* can be characterized by a dynamic of "shaping" and "reflection." The specific urban structure, modes of everyday life, and collective psychology of the period directly influenced creators' artistic orientations and creative materials, thereby indirectly shaping the themes, character types, and emotional tonality of Petty Urbanite *huaju*. At the same time, the stage functioned as an active mirror of social reality: through plot structures, dialogue, and scenic arrangements, spoken drama offered a realistic representation and critical examination of contemporary social landscapes and urban mentalities, thus becoming a crucial lens through which the emotional structure of that society can be understood.

Furthermore, the interaction between society and audiences manifested as a dynamic of "stimulation" and "reconstruction." The social environment not only stimulated urban residents' demand for entertainment and spiritual consolation, but also fostered their aspirations for new modes of life and aesthetic forms. In turn, audiences—especially when a sizeable urban public had emerged as the mainstream—were able, through their collective tastes and patterns of consumption, to reconstruct cultural fashions, consumption practices, and even certain social perceptions.

Between creators and works, a dynamic of "production" and "feedback" was established. Creators produced dramatic works on the basis of market assessments and artistic principles; these works were required to possess both aesthetic value and commercial appeal, and creators could exercise their artistic creativity only within the parameters set by market demand. Once the works entered the market, the feedback they received from audiences—whether positive or negative—directly influenced subsequent production. Positive feedback, in particular, encouraged creators to continue producing, facilitated the reproduction and expansion of their works, and thereby contributed to the formation of a virtuous cycle.

Between creators and audiences, a dynamic of "enlightenment" and "catering" was formed. Creators consistently embraced a sense of social responsibility associated with cultural "enlightenment," "education,"

and "healing." Although the emphasis placed on these responsibilities varied across different historical periods, they nonetheless remained present. At the same time, in order to secure market recognition, creators were compelled to cater to the aesthetic preferences of their audiences. As receivers of artistic works, audiences possessed the power to accept or reject them according to their own tastes. When creators' artistic output aligned with audience demand, audience responses tended toward acceptance, and vice versa. Consequently, during particular periods in which audiences demonstrated a clear demand for specific artistic elements, creators were required to accommodate these preferences in order to ensure the continued reproduction of artistic works.

Finally, the relationship between works and audiences can be characterised by "nourishment" and "choice." Petty Urbanite *huaju* provided audiences with spiritual sustenance, and within the context of the Isolated Island Period, it particularly fulfilled functions of psychological comfort and emotional release. When Petty Urbanite *huaju* was treated as a cultural commodity, audiences were not passive recipients; rather, they actively chose which works to attend based on their personal circumstances and preferences. Their collective choices directly determined the survival and popularity of the plays.

The Connection Between Society and Creators

During the 1937-1941, Shanghai's unique political, economic, and cultural environment had a profound impact on *huaju* creators. This influence can be articulated through the following five aspects:

(1) Stable Political Environment

Despite the widespread devastation caused by war in Shanghai and its surrounding areas, the neutrality policy in the International Settlement and French Concession created a relatively safe and stable environment for creative work. This stability was crucial for the flourishing of the arts during the Isolated Island period. The influx of capital and the establishment of professional theaters significantly contributed to the rise of theater troupes and the professionalization of *huaju* (Zhang 2019), fundamentally transforming creators' living conditions and self-perception. Within a system offering stable market demand and guaranteed performance opportunities, creators were relieved of immediate survival pressures and able to focus on refining their craft and deepening their artistic practice. This process of professionalization itself became a key marker of the elevation of both their social and artistic status (Goldstein 2007: 45).

The elevation of status was first manifested in creators' conscious reflection on and refinement of their professional identity and creative methods. For example, the theorist and playwright Xu Zhuodai (1881–1958) reflected on his experiences during this period:

> 我以前也写过剧本，但自己一读，总觉得剧中人物的对白，都像我一个人的语气。我自己是一个话剧演员，既然能在台上演绎出合适的对话，为什么在剧本中写不好对话呢？我假定自己扮演那个角色，该怎么说话呢？应该怎么体会此人的身份和性格呢？那一个个的角色，都由我一个人来扮演，都由我去体会之后，写出来的对话，就更加生动了。

> [I had previously written scripts, but whenever I reviewed them, the characters' dialogues often sounded too much like my own voice. As a *huaju* actor, I could deliver lines effectively on stage, so why did I struggle to write them convincingly in a script? I began to envision myself performing each role—considering how I would speak and how I should embody the character's identity and personality. By immersing myself in each role and experiencing it from within, the dialogues I crafted became more vibrant and authentic.] (Xu 1957)

Xu Zhuodai's reflections went beyond mere technical concerns; his transformation from a passive adapter to an active shaper of theatrical practice exemplified the internal consolidation of his status as a professional playwright.

Hauser also expressed a viewpoint:

> The social status of the creator is the most important objective condition determining the form and content of artistic works. The creator's interests, desires, opportunities, rights, and the privileges of the group to which they belong best reflect their social status. (Hauser 1982: 48)

Both of these reflections indicate that creators enhanced their status while balancing artistic pursuit and market demands.

(2) Economic Development

Shanghai's flourishing commercial trade during the Isolated Island period significantly impacted the *huaju* market. The rapid population increase in the area, which surged four to five times following the establishment

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of the Isolated Island, provided a robust consumer base for *huaju*. This surge in population and commercial activity not only stimulated the commercialization and scaling of *huaju* but also spurred the growth of cultural consumption and led to the proliferation of theaters and other performance venues.

A commentator vividly described this phenomenon:

孤岛出现之后，人口激增了四五倍，那种特殊的、畸形的发展，简直令人惊叹

[Following the emergence of the Isolated Island period, the population surged by four to five times. This remarkable and atypical growth is truly astonishing.] (Bi 1939)

Supporting data from the 1930s further illustrates this trend. During this period, a new theater opened almost every month, and *huaju* performances began to be staged in a variety of venues beyond traditional theaters. Cinemas, including prominent establishments like Cathay, Nanking, Grand Theatre, Paramount, and Golden City, also started hosting *huaju* performances. In addition, amusement parks such as Great World, New World, and Dashin Amusement Park became important venues for *huaju*. This extensive network of theaters, cinemas, and amusement parks significantly expanded the reach and accessibility of *huaju*, contributing to its popularization and integration into Shanghai's vibrant cultural landscape (Zhao 2021).

(3) Rich Cultural Environment

Shanghai's rich cultural diversity offered creators a vast artistic landscape. The introduction of innovative educational models and increased exposure to Western culture nurtured a new generation of intellectuals deeply engaged with *huaju*. For instance, actor Wang Youyou (1888-1937), who benefited from the progressive education of the Isolated Island period, recounted his profound fascination with acting after his first performance:

尝试了一次演戏，我就深深的被演戏迷住，天下没有比登场扮演更有趣的事情。当我踏上了舞台，几千百只眼睛全部都注意在我一个人身上，我就像做了一个总司令官，观众的感情全部在我的手中，我要命令他们哭，他们就听我话哭起来；我要他们笑，他们就跟我笑起来，我发出去的号令，不怕他们不服从，这是多么有趣的事，做别的事怎么能有这种魔力？因此我深深的爱上了扮演。有

一天，**我**们的英文女教员教我们练习英文对话，**她**问全班学生：'**你将来想做什么**职业？'轮到我回答

的时候，**我毫不**迟疑的站起来答道：'**我愿意做一个扮演者**。

[After my first experience with acting, I was profoundly captivated by it. There is nothing more interesting than performing on stage. As I stand under the spotlight with thousands of eyes fixed solely on me, I feel as though I am commanding an army. The emotions of the audience are completely under my control—if I wish them to cry, they will; if I want them to laugh, they will follow suit. The directives I give are met with immediate compliance. This sense of power is so enthralling that I fell deeply in love with acting. One day, when our English teacher asked the class, 'What career do you want to pursue?' I stood up without hesitation and declared, 'I want to be an actor.'] (Wang 1934)

Wang's ambition to pursue acting, expressed in the classroom of a modern school, would likely have been unthinkable and suppressed by traditional norms outside of Shanghai's progressive educational context. This underscores the cultural openness of Shanghai during the Isolated Island period.

Moreover, the emergence of modern urban culture in the Isolated Island area reflected a distinctive form of cultural hybridity unique to semi-colonial Shanghai. It combined locally available Western modernity resources, evolving indigenous modern practices, and traditional forms rooted in everyday life. Specifically, Western modernity was not imported as an intact, wholesale package, but was filtered through highly commercialized mechanisms (Liu 2020: 33). Examples include the architectural and social infrastructures of the International and French Concessions, the widespread circulation of Western literary translations, newspapers, and periodicals, as well as the lifestyles and value orientations embodied by foreign residents and Westernized local elites. Together, these elements provided urban inhabitants with accessible and usable resources of modernity.

At the same time, indigenous Chinese modernity was continually shaped through the vernacular language movement, new cultural ideals, and the rapid processes of urbanization. These elements interacted with deeply rooted local cultural sentiments, particularly those surrounding family ethics, social relations, and the narrative aesthetics embedded in classical literature and regional operatic forms. The fusion of these three cultural currents produced a distinct cultural stratum. As the scholar Liu Cunren (1917–2009) noted, this phenomenon constituted a form of "middlebrow" culture (Liu 1984), signifying not merely a literary genre but a novel cultural form. This urban culture, straddling the upper and lower classes, arose in the Isolated Island

area and was intimately linked to its everyday life. It reflects the intricate cultural influences shaping creators during this period.

(4) Urban Life Transformations

The changes in urban life during the Isolated Island period provided creators with rich material and creative inspiration. Through depicting shifts in family relationships and gender concepts, creators reflected the pressures and challenges of urban life. Some studies have analyzed that *huaju* works during the Isolated Island period focused more on the emotional states during the transition between old and new values and the resulting social issues (Yin 2022).

(5) Survival Needs

Under the pressure of survival, creators had to adapt to the trends of the time and produce works that met market demands. Playwright Yu Ling (1907-1997), a famous playwright of the Isolated Island period, discussed his work "Tears on Flowers (花溅泪)," which was based on the life of a dancer and sold exceptionally well:

题材选择只是为了满足当时的市场环境，这限制了我的艺术追求[The choice of subject matter was driven primarily by the market demands of the time, which constrained my artistic aspirations.](Li 2011: 25)

His next work, "Women's Apartment (女子公寓)," sold even better, but Yu Ling remained dissatisfied:

去吧，《女子公寓》，让我忘掉你吧，让我写些其它的、值得记忆的作品来代替你。[Go ahead, 'Women's Apartment,' let me forget you and write something else, something worthy of being remembered.] (Yu 1985: 239-240)

Another renowned playwright of the same period, Playwright Yao Ke (1905-1991), wrote about his work "Resentment in the Qing Palace (清宫怨)":

时间是作品最严酷的实验。许多曾经轰动一时的作品，现在都被人们遗忘了。在时间的实验中，一切宣传、标榜、捧场和机智，都是无用的，只剩下剧本本身的价值。[Time is the ultimate test of a

work's merit. Many pieces that once created a sensation are now forgotten. In the face of time, all propaganda, boasting, and hype become irrelevant; only the intrinsic value of the work endures.] (Yao 1980: 2)

These reflections by creators suggest that despite commercial success, some held a critical view of their own works, striving for deeper artistic value.

The Connection Between Society and Petty Urbanite huaju

During the Isolated Island period, the relationship between society and Petty Urbanite *huaju* was reflected in the following six aspects:

(1) Cultural Diversity and the Richness of Petty Urbanite *huaju* Themes

The cultural environment during the Isolated Island period was characterized by a rich interplay of Chinese and foreign influences, as well as a synthesis of ancient and modern arts. This cultural convergence significantly broadened the creative horizons and artistic expression of Petty Urbanite *huaju*. Creators were no longer restricted to traditional themes and techniques; instead, they embraced a wide array of cultural elements, incorporating modern literature, historical narratives, foreign classics, and other diverse influences. This fusion resulted in an unprecedented diversity in the subject matter, themes, and plots of Petty Urbanite *huaju*.

For example, playwright Zhou Yibai (1900-1977)'s adaptation of "Li Xiangjun (李香君)" from *Xiqu* "The Peach Blossom Fan (桃花扇)" illustrates this innovative approach. Zhou not only drew from the original story "The Peach Blossom Fan" but also meticulously researched historical documents to ensure accuracy. He explained his motivation for the adaptation:

本人此次以《桃花扇》传奇改编为《李香君》话剧，一方面是取其曲折故事，意味深长；一方面则以其主旨有在，大可反映现实。今日之日，虽与明代末年迥然有别，而论地论人，自亦有可夵合之处，唯其如此，则李香君之搬上舞台似非全无意义。[In adapting the legendary Peach Blossom Fan into the *huaju* Li Xiangjun, I aimed not only to preserve its intricate narrative and profound themes but also to use its essence to reflect contemporary realities. Although the present day contrasts sharply with the late

Ming dynasty, there are enduring connections in terms of place and people, making the staging of Li Xiangjun both relevant and meaningful.] (Zhou 1940: 3)

Zhou's approach highlights how creators of Petty Urbanite *huaju* merged ancient and modern arts to explore and reflect on contemporary societal issues.

Moreover, director Chen Liting (1910–2013) adapted Gogol's play "The Inspector General." Although the scenic flats featured Russian-style architecture, details such as the upper sections of the wall windows and the areas beyond the side doors were deliberately omitted, leaving empty space around the set to emphasize spatial ambiance (Li 1986: 228–231). These examples reflect the aesthetic pursuit of integrating Chinese and Western artistic traditions. Such creative innovations offered audiences fresh and immersive theatrical experiences, further highlighting the dynamic cultural exchange and artistic vitality that characterized Petty Urbanite Drama during the Isolated Island period.

(2) Social Value Shifts and the Deepening Themes of Petty Urbanite *huaju*

The Isolated Island period witnessed a rapid transformation in social values, with increasing conflicts and contradictions between traditional and modern ideas. As Esslin noted, "Drama is a mirror through which the social values and lifestyle of the time can be seen" (Esslin 1977: 29). Petty Urbanite *huaju*, serving as a reflection of the social realities of the time, naturally incorporated these conflicts into its themes and narratives. Among the most prominent social issues explored in Petty Urbanite *huaju* were gender and class differences.

For example, the play "The New Wife (新妇)" depicted the internal conflicts within families, highlighting the rising status of women and the challenges to traditional values, such as filial piety. Similarly, Women's Apartment employed a nuanced narrative approach to explore the profound impact of class and gender differences on individual destinies. These works provided audiences with deep insights into the social issues of the time and offered ample space for reflection on the changing social landscape.

(3) Economic Shifts and Petty Urbanite *huaju*'s Concern for Reality

The rapid economic development during the Isolated Island period led to a widespread acceptance of a commercial economy and a heightened focus on profit. In response to these changes, Petty Urbanite *huaju* began to delve deeper into themes that explored the impact of economic interests on interpersonal

relationships and human nature. The play "Beasts in Clothing (衣冠禽兽)" is a prime example, using exaggerated methods to expose the corrosive effects of material desire on human nature and the degradation of social morals. This work reflects contemporary society's critique and introspection regarding the profit-driven mentality that had come to dominate the era.

In the play, the character Jin Yuehan famously declared:

> 我只知道世界上最大的力量，第一是钱，第二是钱，第三还是钱。[I believe that the greatest power in the world is, first and foremost, money; second, money; and third, still money.] (Gu 1941)

This statement encapsulates the prevailing attitude towards wealth and power during the time, serving as a pointed commentary on how economic forces had reshaped values and interactions within society.

(4) Political Stability and the Flourishing of Petty Urbanite *huaju* Performances

During the Isolated Island period, the political environment within the Shanghai International Settlement and French Concession remained remarkably stable despite the surrounding warfare. This stability provided a fertile ground for the growth of Petty Urbanite *huaju*. The rise of commercial amusement complexes—large indoor entertainment venues integrating opera, film, vaudeville, and other popular forms—together with the construction of in-house theatres in department stores and hotels, created new performance spaces and opportunities for Petty Urbanite *huaju*. These developments, supported by both political stability and economic growth, allowed Petty Urbanite *huaju* to flourish rapidly during this period.

(5) Social Environment and the Shift in Petty Urbanite *huaju*'s Objectives

The economic prosperity and social changes that characterized the Isolated Island period led to a significant shift in the objectives of Petty Urbanite *huaju*. As the art form became increasingly commodified, its primary goal shifted towards catering to the entertainment needs of the urban middle class. While artistic expression remained important, the focus of Petty Urbanite *huaju* increasingly centered on enhancing the audience's viewing experience and fostering emotional resonance. By addressing social realities and life philosophies through entertainment, Petty Urbanite *huaju* successfully adapted to the changing social environment.

(6) The Role of Petty Urbanite *huaju* in Social Development and Its Historical Value

Petty Urbanite *huaju* played a dual role during the Isolated Island period: it was both a recorder of social realities and an active participant in social development. Through stage art, it captured the diversity and complexity of society, reflecting the nuances of the time. Additionally, its performances and dissemination contributed to the growth of related industries, creating a positive interaction between culture and the economy. The development of Petty Urbanite *huaju* enriched the cultural life of the Isolated Island period, making it an integral part of Shanghai's cultural heritage. Moreover, it provided valuable material for future research into the social conditions of this unique historical period, as noted by Yin (2022: 22).

The Connection Between Society and the Audience

During the Isolated Island period, the relationship between society and the audience was manifested in the following three aspects:

(1) Spiritual Pursuit Amidst Distorted Prosperity

While most regions of China were engulfed by the devastation of war, the Shanghai International Settlement and the French Concession experienced a rapid increase in both wealth and population due to the influx of capital and resources. By 1938, the number of workers and factories in the concessions had reached unprecedented levels, as documented by Wu Jingping and others (Wu 2001). This material abundance provided the citizens with a wider array of entertainment options, resulting in a temporary flourishing of drama and other forms of amusement.

However, this prosperity was not without its challenges. The looming uncertainty of the future and the constant threat of war created an underlying anxiety among the populace. This anxiety led to a heightened desire for spiritual relief, as people sought ways to cope with the psychological strain. With the relative weakening of ideological control during this period, the public's pursuit of entertainment became unusually intense—a phenomenon known as "compensatory migration" (Li 2011). This term describes how psychological tension caused by the war was redirected into other areas as a means of alleviation.

In addition, the interruption of Hollywood film imports created a significant void in urban entertainment. Although local film production, traditional Chinese opera, and various musical performances continued to exist in Shanghai, the distinctive narratives of contemporary urban life, the realist visual style, and the aura of modern consumer culture associated with Hollywood cinema (Yeh 2021: 155–156) resonated closely with the emerging Petty Urbanite *huaju*. Consequently, when Hollywood film temporarily withdrew as the dominant

entertainment commodity, Petty Urbanite *huaju*, by virtue of its comparable thematic orientations and urban sensibilities, naturally became the most immediate substitute, attracting large numbers of audiences and consumer spending that had previously been directed toward cinema. As the critic Song Qi (1919–1996) recall:

> **原因很**简单，因为好莱坞的电影没法来了，可是市民需要娱乐，唯一能代替美国电影的就是话剧。
>
> [The reason is straightforward: with Hollywood films unavailable and citizens seeking entertainment, drama was the only viable alternative to American movies.] (Jing 1985: 113)

This "compensatory migration" phenomenon not only reflected the public's need for spiritual comfort but also their longing for a semblance of modern life amidst the chaos of war. Drama, particularly *huaju*, became a crucial outlet for the citizens, offering them both an escape and a way to process the complex emotions and uncertainties of the time. This period of distorted prosperity thus saw the rise of drama as a significant cultural force, providing not just entertainment but also a means of psychological and emotional support.

(2) Audience Aesthetics and Cultural Formation

Zhang Zhongli noted that the citizen class, which primarily comprised small merchants and office workers, constituted the main body of urban cultural consumption during this era (Zhang 2008). This class not only had the means to engage in cultural consumption but also harbored a strong desire to emulate and adopt modern Western lifestyles. Their aesthetic preferences and values were significant drivers in the formation and development of Shanghai's modern urban culture.

The citizen class's affinity for drama was influenced by more than just spiritual needs; it was also deeply connected to their pursuit of a modern way of life. In Shanghai, during the Isolated Island period, activities such as hosting parties, frequenting dance halls, listening to new plays, and watching movies became emblematic of modern living (Xi 1996: 366). These activities were more than mere entertainment; they were expressions of a particular attitude towards life, reflecting the citizen class's aspirations for modernity.

(3) Followers of Modern Lifestyles

The citizen class, especially the professionally educated groups, exerted a profound influence on Shanghai's urban culture through their aesthetic preferences and modern lifestyles. By engaging in cultural consumption,

such as attending drama performances, they not only satisfied their spiritual needs but also contributed to the advancement of Shanghai's cultural modernization.

These educated audiences, through their pursuit of both spiritual and material satisfaction, significantly shaped the cultural landscape of Shanghai. Their aesthetic habits and values not only influenced the city's cultural development but also dictated and constrained their own life choices, reflecting the complex interplay between individual aspirations and the broader cultural environment during this period.

The Connection Between Creators and Petty Urbanite huaju

During the Isolated Island period, the connection between creators and petty urbanite *huaju* can be observed in the following four aspects:

(1) Dual Motivations of Creators

During the Isolated Island period, creators of *huaju* faced a dual set of challenges, both economic and artistic. On the economic front, many were driven by the necessity to survive in a tumultuous social environment. The pressure to focus on the cultural market and earn a livelihood often overshadowed their artistic aspirations. Actor Shi Hui (1915-1957), famously dubbed the "Emperor of *huaju*," candidly expressed this reality when he said:

> **多么好笑的一件事！我演**员的最初动机是为了吃饭。我没有爱好，没有兴趣，更没有信仰，什么是艺术，什么是话剧运动，根本没听说过。我没饭吃，话剧管我一顿饭，我就干了话剧！[How ironic it is! My initial motivation for becoming an actor was simply to earn a living. I had no particular hobbies, interests, or beliefs. Art and the *huaju* movement were unfamiliar to me. With no food on the table, *huaju* provided me with a means to make a living, so I pursued it.] (Shi 1982: 277)

This statement poignantly illustrates how the harsh social conditions of the time influenced creators, pushing them to engage in *huaju* primarily as a means of sustenance rather than as a passion or calling.

On the artistic side, however, some creators sought to rise above these economic constraints by pursuing innovation and maintaining the purity of their artistic endeavors. They adhered to the philosophy of " *l' art pure l' art,*" striving to create great works that transcended the mundane concerns of daily life. For these individuals, the act of creating art itself became a form of psychological compensation, providing them with a sense of purpose and fulfillment even in the face of a challenging environment (Graña 1964; Simpson 1981).

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This tension between economic necessity and artistic integrity characterized the creative landscape of the Isolated Island period, reflecting the complex interplay between survival and self-expression that *huaju* creators navigated during this era.

(2) Balancing Economic and Artistic Rewards

The unique social environment of the Isolated Island period compelled creators to navigate the delicate balance between economic gain and artistic fulfillment. This equilibrium was not only a strategic choice but also a necessary one to meet both their financial and creative needs. Even those initially driven by economic concerns found themselves compelled to innovate to avoid producing repetitive or uninspired works.

As Howard S. Becker noted, "The uniqueness of an art piece comes from the combination of conventional materials and innovation" (Becker 2008: 63). This innovation was essential not just for the vitality of artistic works but also for the creators' survival and development within the cultural industry. Similarly, Lampel, Lant, & Shamsie (2000: 263) emphasized that "building creative systems and supporting and marketing cultural products are fundamental to the creative value in the cultural industry". Thus, the ability to innovate within the constraints of economic necessity was a key factor in the success of petty urbanite *huaju*.

(3) Positive Feedback from Petty Urbanite *huaju*

Petty urbanite *huaju* provided significant positive feedback for creators, encompassing both economic and artistic dimensions. Economically, this feedback was evident in the substantial salaries and impressive ticket sales that successful productions garnered. For instance, Shi Hui's transition from poverty to earning 500 yuan per month and the record-breaking box office success of " Thunderstorm (雷雨)" highlighted the lucrative potential of petty urbanite *huaju*.

Artistically, the feedback, though more subjective and nuanced, was equally impactful. The performances of actors like Shi Hui and the critical acclaim for the artistic content of Thunderstorm exemplified the recognition and appreciation that creators received from their audiences. This positive reinforcement not only validated their work but also fueled their ongoing creative endeavors.

(4) Variability in Artistic Feedback Needs

Despite the positive feedback, not all creators were entirely satisfied with their artistic output. For example, playwrite Yu Ling expressed dissatisfaction with "Flower Falls Tears (花溅泪) " and "Women's Apartment (女

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子公寓) ", despite their commercial success. He felt that these works constrained his artistic ambitions and did not fully meet his expectations for artistic feedback (Yu 1985: 239-240).

This sense of dissatisfaction did not diminish the creators' drive to continue their work. Instead, it highlighted the variability in individual creators' needs for artistic fulfillment and their personal definitions of artistic value. As Marx observed, "The prosperity of art does not always proportionally match the general development of society" (Hu 2009: 148). The development of petty urbanite *huaju* during the Isolated Island period represents a path explored by creators to balance economic and artistic rewards, ultimately contributing to the popularization and evolution of Chinese modern drama.

The Connection Between Creators and the Audience

The connection between creators and audiences during the Isolated Island period can be observed in the following four aspects:

(1) Interaction Between Creators and Audience Aesthetics

During the Isolated Island period, creators, motivated by both economic needs and artistic aspirations, began to deeply explore audience acceptance and aesthetic preferences. They recognized that audiences were not only the ultimate judges of their artistic works but also the source of creative vitality. Understanding the audience's tastes and desires became essential for success.

Yu Ling, expressed this sentiment succinctly when he noted:

> 观众是我必须日日夜夜面对的一个个普通市民，历史剧和现实剧的实践经验和教训告诉我，如果想让我的作品和剧团在上海发展，只有一条道路，那就是贴近世俗生活，深入市民观众，表现小市民，认同小市民。[The audience comprises the ordinary citizens I encounter daily. The experiences and lessons from both historical and contemporary dramas have taught me that for my work and troupe to thrive in Shanghai, it is essential to engage with everyday life. I must immerse myself in the lives of petty urbanites, accurately portray their experiences, and develop a deep connection with them.] (Yu 1941)

This insightful analysis of audience psychology became a cornerstone for improving the themes, subjects, and plots of plays. By aligning their creative efforts with the lived experiences and expectations of petty urbanite

audiences, creators were able to craft works that resonated more deeply with their viewers, ultimately contributing to the popularization and enduring appeal of *huaju* during this era.

(2) Improvement of Themes and Subjects in *huaju*

To draw and retain audiences, creators of petty urbanite *huaju* continually refined the themes and subjects of their works. They contrasted the fates of different characters and amplified the dramatic tension within the storylines to produce a more compelling narrative impact. For example, Yu Ling expanded the portrayal of urban life in " Shanghai Night (夜上海) ", utilizing the life experiences and emotional entanglements of the character Mei Ehui to captivate urban audiences (Yu 1958: 506-508). Moreover, the comedic style of petty urbanite *huaju*, with its focus on everyday life and mass entertainment, emerged as a defining characteristic of the period.

(3) Emotional Resonance Through Dialect Performance

During the Isolated Island period, petty urbanite *huaju* utilized the Shanghai dialect in performances to enhance emotional resonance with the audience. The use of the local dialect made the plays more relatable to the audience, allowing for nuanced depictions of everyday life that fostered a sense of familiarity. For instance, "The Pearl Tower (珍珠塔) ", performed in the Shanghai dialect, created a strong sense of intimacy with local viewers, thereby deepening their emotional engagement with the production.

(4) Commercial Use of Star Power

Creators also strategically employed star power to attract audiences, enhance publicity, and boost ticket sales. The Chinese Touring Theater Group is a prime example of this approach, leveraging the fame of playwrights, directors, and actors to draw large crowds. Star actors like Tang Ruoqing (1918-1983) became brands unto themselves, with plays and advertisements centered around their names, underscoring the commercial value of these stars. However, the reliance on star power also brought certain limitations and negative effects, such as constraints on the portrayal of characters and a potential stagnation in artistic innovation.

The Connection Between Petty Urbanite huaju and the Audience

The connection between petty urbanite *huaju* and audiences during the Isolated Island period can be analyzed through the following two aspects:

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(1) Audience Choice Mechanism and the Popularization of Petty Urbanite *huaju*

Jauss's concept of the "horizon of expectation" (Jauss 1982) offers a valuable framework for understanding the relationship between audiences and petty urbanite *huaju*. This concept encompasses the audience's accumulated knowledge of dramatic forms, styles, and techniques, shaped by their personal experiences, historical and social contexts, aesthetic and value perspectives, and their political and economic status.

The horizon of expectation significantly influences the audience's basic psychological attitude towards aesthetic acceptance. As Krücher observes (Krücher 1997: 44):

> In the process of reading, readers usually read what they want to read. In other words, audiences always expect to find in the work what they already know from their own experience.

This means that while engaging with a drama, audience members rely on their own aesthetic preferences and life experiences to identify familiar elements, leading to personal associations and resonances.

Brockett also states (Brockett & Hildy 2007: 18):

> Since performers tend to cater to audiences, audience reactions play a significant role in determining the content of performances.

This observation highlights that during the Isolated Island period, the popularization of Petty Urbanite *huaju* was strongly influenced by audience choice mechanisms. Drama theorist Song Chunfang （1892-1938） directly underscores this point (Li 2011: 71):

> 近代话剧的命运，完全是被那些坐在正厅后面以及 3 楼上的看客操纵的。[The fate of modern drama is entirely influenced by the spectators seated in the main hall and the third-floor balcony.]

(2) How Petty Urbanite *huaju* Meets Audience's Spiritual Needs

British philosopher John Locke posits that leisure is as crucial to human well-being as work and sustenance (Locke 1693: 202-203). Engaging in pleasurable activities, such as watching drama, is a fundamental way for people to navigate their leisure time and alleviate stress. Petty urbanite *huaju*, as a form of entertainment art, plays a significant role in fulfilling the aesthetic and emotional needs of urban citizens.

At its core, petty urbanite *huaju* offers a form of escapist entertainment, crafting an idealized world through relatable narratives and idealized characters. This genre provides viewers with not only sensory stimulation and curiosity satisfaction but also a sense of recognition and acceptance of core ethical values such as goodness, emotion, and righteousness.

The audience for petty urbanite *huaju* is notably diverse, encompassing individuals from various social classes, cultural backgrounds, and economic levels. This diversity allows petty urbanite *huaju* to cater to a wide range of spiritual and cultural needs, creating a relatively balanced cultural ecosystem during the Isolated Island period. By addressing the varied tastes and preferences of its audience, petty urbanite *huaju* offers enjoyment that aligns with both cultural and consumer expectations, enriching the urban cultural landscape.

The Mechanism Behind the Birth of Petty Urbanite huaju

Petty Urbanite *huaju* represents a significant milestone in the popularization of Chinese modern drama, marking a profound transformation in the art form. Prior to the emergence of Petty Urbanite *huaju*, drama was primarily an elite art form, accessible mainly to the upper classes. It required audiences to possess a certain level of cultural literacy to grasp the values and knowledge conveyed in the plays, as well as the financial means to afford attendance. These barriers created a substantial divide between drama and the broader middle and lower classes.

However, from a contemporary perspective, the popularization of drama reflects a natural trend in the ongoing development of society. As societal conditions improved, particularly the economic stability and cultural awareness of the middle and lower classes, the demand for drama also increased. The popularization of Chinese modern drama during the Isolated Island Period is particularly distinctive, offering rich research material and valuable insights.

By applying the Cultural Diamond Theory, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between Petty Urbanite *huaju* and society. We assert that the emergence of Petty Urbanite *huaju* was driven by multiple, interrelated, and systemic factors, rather than by a single cause. These factors interacted and influenced one another, ultimately contributing to the birth of Petty Urbanite *huaju*. Based on this theory, we categorize the process of its emergence into three stages, revealing the internal mechanisms behind the popularization of Chinese modern drama, as illustrated in Figure 2.
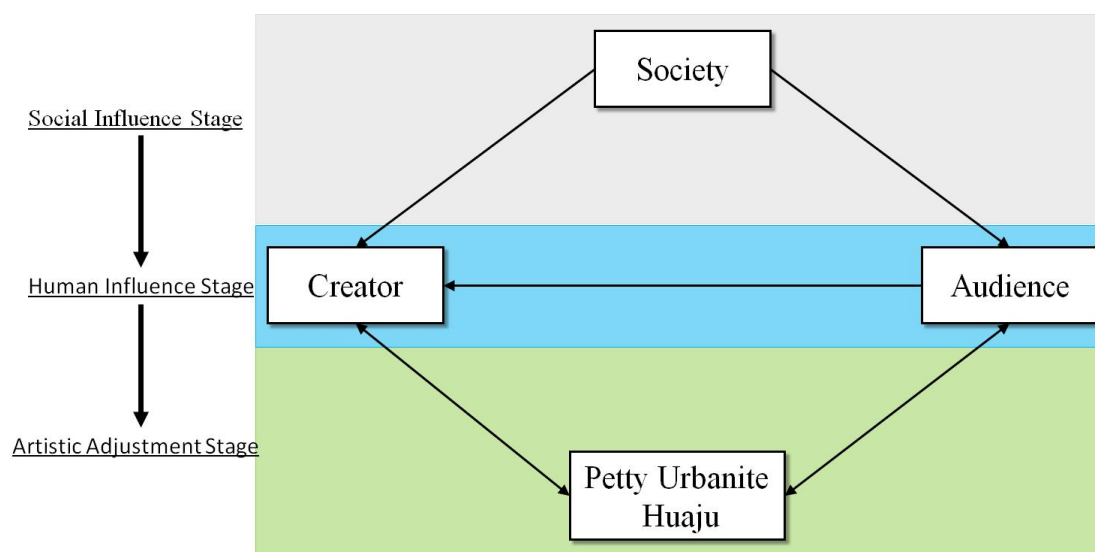
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Fig. 2 – The Mechanism Behind the Birth of Petty Urbanite *huaju*

Stage 1: Social Influence Stage

During the Isolated Island Period, the stark contrast between the Shanghai International Settlement and the rest of China was palpable. While chaos and fear reigned outside, the Concession enjoyed relative tranquility and stability. This unique environment led to a weakening of ideological control, an abnormal economic prosperity, and pervasive uncertainty about the future. These factors collectively shaped a distinctive psychological state among the citizens, who developed a strong demand for entertainment. This demand manifested in what can be termed as "compensatory migration," where citizens sought refuge in entertainment to alleviate psychological stress, temporarily escaping the pressures of survival and enhancing their desire for life.

With Hollywood films no longer available, *huaju* emerged as a popular alternative, catalyzing the development of a culturally and economically modern urban landscape and driving the growth of the *huaju* market. The relatively stable political environment within the Settlement also reduced creators' concerns about personal safety, allowing them to focus more intently on drama creation. This shift promoted the professionalization, commercialization, and expansion of *huaju* as an art form. The introduction of new educational systems within the Settlement further increased cultural inclusiveness and attracted a diverse array of artists. Against the backdrop of cultural diversity, creators absorbed influences from Western culture, modern Chinese culture, and traditional Chinese culture, which broadened their artistic perspectives, elevated their creative standards, and provided rich inspiration from the evolving urban life.

Thus, the increased market demand driven by citizens' entertainment needs, coupled with the enhancement of creators' artistic standards in a complex cultural environment, laid a solid foundation for the subsequent Human Influence Stage.

Stage 2: Human Influence Stage

During the Isolated Island Period, creators gained a profound understanding of the audience's diversity and uniqueness, analyzing and catering to their aesthetic preferences to meet their growing entertainment needs. By establishing boundaries based on factors such as emotion, ideology, class, occupation, ethnicity, and gender, creators fostered a sense of belonging among different audience groups. They recognized that the audience held the ultimate advantage in artistic creation since their work had to resonate with the audience's preferences and needs. Consequently, creators delved deeper into audience reception studies, exploring psychological tendencies to better align their work with popular demand.

Creators understood that for art to captivate audiences, it needed to achieve popularization. They proposed and practiced the theory of "popularization," aiming to engage the audience without overly pandering to or compromising on artistic standards. Audiences favored accessible, vivid, and distinct art forms, prompting creators to refine their techniques and enhance the quality of their work to meet popular tastes while retaining artistic value. They also adapted the themes, subjects, and storylines of *huaju* to appeal to audiences with varying cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, they identified the significant role of female audiences in the *huaju* market, carefully considering them when selecting scripts and crafting performances. This reflects the creators' deep insight into audience psychology, their high level of artistic skill, and their thorough understanding of the theory of popularization.

In summary, during the Isolated Island Period, creators' in-depth research and understanding of their audience allowed them to continuously refine their artistic direction and techniques, even leading to the development of new cultural theories. These efforts paved the way for the subsequent Artistic Adjustment Stage.

Stage 3: Artistic Adjustment Stage

The unique social environment of the Isolated Island Period placed significant pressure on creators, while the substantial entertainment demand and distinct aesthetic preferences of the citizen audience added further challenges. These factors compelled creators to strike a delicate balance between economic interests and

artistic aspirations. By blending everyday life materials with innovative elements, creators produced a wide array of *huaju* works, collectively known as Petty Urbanite *huaju*, which avoided the pitfalls of monotony.

Petty Urbanite *huaju*, as a form of leisure art, featured diverse content and modes of expression. It created an idealized world through relatable stories and characters, offering citizens hope and solace in their daily lives. During the Isolated Island Period, Petty Urbanite *huaju* met the needs of audiences from various social classes, cultural backgrounds, and economic levels, fostering a relatively balanced cultural ecosystem. Citizens found enjoyment in Petty Urbanite *huaju* that resonated with their cultural and consumption preferences.

The audience's response to Petty Urbanite *huaju* served as vital feedback for creators. Positive feedback included economic rewards such as increased salaries and high box office sales, as well as artistic recognition and imitation by peers. These affirmations not only provided crucial motivation for creators to continue their artistic production but also guided adjustments in their artistic products or practices, ensuring the sustained vitality of Petty Urbanite *huaju*.

Conclusion

Through the lens of cultural diamond theory, this paper examines the factors contributing to the emergence of Petty Urbanite *huaju* during the Isolated Island Period. The study reveals that the rise of Petty Urbanite *huaju* was driven by the intricate interplay between the social environment, creator motivations, and audience demands, shedding light on the complex mechanisms behind the transformation of Chinese modern *huaju* from an elite art form to a popular cultural phenomenon.

Firstly, the diversity and complexity of the social environment during the Isolated Island Period provided fertile ground for innovation in both the themes and forms of Petty Urbanite *huaju*. Shanghai, as a cultural frontier where Sino-Western influences converged, offered unprecedented creative freedom and rich sources of inspiration for *huaju* creators due to its unique political, economic, and cultural context. Secondly, creators, while striving for artistic expression, had to navigate market demands and survival pressures, which drove the diversification of Petty Urbanite *huaju*. Lastly, the aesthetic preferences and decision-making processes of the audience played a decisive role in the popularization of *huaju*. The success of Petty Urbanite *huaju* lay not only in its ability to satisfy the entertainment needs of the audience but also in its capacity to resonate deeply with them, thereby reflecting and updating social values.

This study enhances the understanding of Petty Urbanite *huaju* during the Isolated Island Period and offers new insights into the broader process of popularizing Chinese *huaju*. By analyzing the interactions between

Petty Urbanite *huaju*, society, creators, and audiences, the paper illustrates the complex and dynamic relationship between art and society, as well as the positive role that art can play in driving social change.

The emergence and development of Petty Urbanite *huaju* during the Isolated Island Period represent a significant turning point in the history of Chinese modern drama and serve as a vivid example of art-society interaction. This research provides valuable insight into how art, under specific historical conditions, can become a bridge connecting creators, audiences, and society, thereby fostering cultural progress and contributing to societal development.

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