



2013 文化領袖論壇

藝術與創業精神：成功條件及要訣
ARTS ENTREPRENEURSHIP
• WHAT IT TAKES & HOW IT WORKS •

27-29.5.2013

Co-presented by Hong Kong Arts Administrators Association and West Kowloon Cultural District Authority

The Periodic Table of the “Meng Jinghui” Elements

In China's performing arts market, there is no doubt that “Meng Jinghui” is a famous brand. Not only does the name refer to the famous pioneering drama director, but it also refers to the eponymous production and operation team headed and led by the famous drama producer Ge Dali. Meanwhile, it includes the Fengchao (Beehive) Theatre located at No. 3 Xingzhong Street, Dongzhimenwai (outside Dongzhi Gate), as well as four performing troupes that collectively present 700 shows annually in more than 10 cities throughout China. It also refers to in an abstract sense, a style in the arts, one that is imbued with freedom, relaxation, diversity and freshness, and has accordingly made a clear impact on many young people in Beijing who are devoted to drama.

From Studio to Theatre: Artistic vs Management

The brand development of “Meng Jinghui” is grounded in the following fundamentals: continually creating without sacrificing vibrancy, the guarantee of suitable venues, and the seamless cooperation between artistic and management.

Almost every artist would like his or her individual creations to achieve the status of a brand in the performing arts market, but to accomplish that, a way must be found to guarantee that production becomes a continuous process without extinguishing the creative spark. Let us consider the establishment of “Meng Jinghui Studio”. In 2001 shooting began of the film *Chicken Poets*, directed by Meng Jinghui. The film is a low cost production that brings encouragement and provides a model for idealistic people, and it marked the

first step on a march toward the branding of “Meng Jinghui” arts.

As Ge Dali recalls, “Before the film shooting, we usually formed our teams just in time to produce a drama. Film productions are complicated and involve significant logistics tasks by its artistic management. We needed a fixed working place for our administrators. So, after the filming, we rented a two-room flat as our studio and Meng Jinghui, two staff members and I, were able to work in a fixed location.” The establishment of the studio seems to be an on-the-spot decision, but it was clearly the right choice: “I think a studio should still be imbued with a personality that serves and fosters artistic creativity. The focus of the studio is not on operation *per se*, but on supporting the artistic creations of Meng Jinghui.”

Instead of process standardization, Ge thinks continually creating is more pertinent to their development: “In terms of artistic productions, creating a drama naturally depends on standardization. Compared with the past, the job allocation and work flow are just the same, but what was one person's work has now become the responsibility of an entire department. There is no doubt a department can accomplish much more than a single person; in the past we were only able to produce one or two dramas a year but now the capability exists to carry out more complex and large-scale projects.” Ge believes that the transformation of the studio from a small undertaking by four people into one that nowadays employs a staff of more than 100 persons did not involve too many changes in matters such as standards and workflow. Rather, its biggest difference lies in the evolvement of a system that would guarantee regular

artistic creation of certain scales and standards, allowing artistic creation to become a regular process instead of a guerrilla endeavor.

While continually creating is a precondition to good creativity, the increase of quantity is also dependent on another key factor, the theatre itself. For creative teams that produce dramas primarily for small theatres, theatre rental charge is often a big concern in production budgets. It wasn't until in 2008 when the team secured Fengchao Theatre for its performances that many of their ideals can be realize. Meng Jinghui recalls, "It was called the Dongchang Cinema back then. At that time a company invested more than 4 million yuan to convert it into the Fengchao Theatre. We applied for some one-off government subsidies and chipped in our own revenue to pay back the investment company so that we could gain better autonomy in terms of theatre usage."

In the mainland, there are a number of studios featuring independent productions, but they usually do not have their own theatres. This often creates a gap between the production and the actual performances, which in turn makes it difficult to guarantee sustainability. At the same time, there are many private theatres in China that do not have studios and spaces for production, performances and other related activities, leaving these venues unsupported in terms of programming and creation. "Fengchao Theatre is crucially important for us as it is the core centre that links everything together, from creating, presentation to touring." In Meng's eyes, the Theatre is that link between creation and operation; but for Ge, the theatre is an experimental space to build the practical skills on which Meng's aesthetic expression is based: "Fengchao Theatre is the only theatre in Beijing under the charge of an artistic director that is an actual artist. The theatre is a creative space, with Director Meng Jinghui at its aesthetics and creative core."

The partnership between Meng Jinghui and Ge Dali would be described as faultless. In Meng's "artistic brain", there is always a respect for Ge's practical operational management prowess, while Ge is firmly appreciative of Meng's artistic creation. This seamless cooperation and mutual respect between artistry and management has clearly been another important factor for the success of the brand of "Meng Jinghui". Meng describes his relationship with Ge as follows: "If I insist on doing one thing and I must do it or it is impossible for me not to do it, then he will give in to me. I know that in the entire process, Ge takes up more burdens than I do.

The reason is that if the operation is not ideal, or there are rooms for technical improvement, I can always pick on this or that. However, if the creation itself is flawed, he will never tell me my play does not work."

For Ge, the "Meng Jinghui" drama brand is principally targeted at white collar elites. It has taken Ge 10 years of exploration to arrive at this market positioning. "Many people think that we expend great effort in analyzing audience taste and then adjust the direction of our production. But that is not the actual case. For management and operation, we certainly have to follow business protocols and laws. When it comes to art, it also has its own protocols and laws. Ten years ago, I conducted many audience surveys, and I thought of many methods for developing the market. At that time I was beset by a host of worries. Later I realized all these worries were unnecessary. I discovered that if we tried to pander to mass tastes in order to develop the market, it simply did not work. Meng Jinghui's works are about dreams. Our mission is to spread those dreams to others. Gaining acceptance for one's idea is the best public relations strategy."

Meng's works are known for being pioneering, which limits his target segments to elite groups who are well educated and culturally sophisticated. Performing at small theatres also means they cannot target the market like large carnivals do. "We have one show a day at Fengchao Theatre that can accommodate 300 people. In one year, that would amount to 50,000 to 60,000 people. Even if all the tickets were sold out, there would just be 60,000 people who came to see my works every year. What does 60,000 people mean in a city of 20 million people? That means our audience members come from the very top of the customer pyramid."

In fact, *Rhinoceros in Love* has been performed for 15 years in different versions by different generations of performers, and it continues to sell today. *Two Dogs*, for its part, has been performed one thousand times in 6 years. These figures are a stirring vindication of Ge's market judgment, in that "the judgment of the arts always trumps the judgment of the market". Among acclaimed dramas such as *Si Fan*, *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *Rhinoceros in Love*, *Bedbug*, *New Love Concept*, *The Flower in the Mirror & the Moon on the Water*, *An Exotic Encounter*, *Two Dogs*, *Liebe ist kälter als der Tod*, *The Murder of Hanging Garden*, *Don Quixote de la Mancha*, and *Three Oranges' Love*, *Soft*, 80% have been performed over 100

times, while two of them have been presented more than 1000 times. Such numbers prove the results are not a flash in the pan.

Ge notes, “We now have weekly meetings to discuss ticketing status and any incidences that has occurred, and then we proceed to work out the solutions. However, these meetings are more a matter of maintenance than market expansion. What really helps in market development and promotion is the impact of your artistic creation. Now, every time we produce a drama, we will consider whether it can be performed for 20 years instead of just 20 times. Of course it is impossible to succeed every time, but that remains the goal we are pursuing – the impact of the arts, not ticket sales. Your artistic creativity will determine your market. The more authentic your attitude toward artistic production, the bigger the market you will gain.” Pursuing the depth of the market instead of its width, such is the brand’s chosen approach towards developing the high-end market.

National Touring: Craft based principles

It is said that “Meng Jinghui” large-scale touring started from the play *Amber*. Early in 2003, the performance market was experiencing a downturn because of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic. *Rhinoceros in Love* had just presented a trial performance. Meng recalls, “At that time, we hadn’t had Fengchao yet, and we were also facing a crisis due to the poor market environment. So we toured *Rhinoceros in Love* to several cities including Beijing, Shanghai and Shenzhen.” The performances were very well received, the success not only saved them from financial crisis, but also gave them greater confidence in organizing nationwide tours. In 2006, *Amber*, starring Liu Ye and Yuan Quan, went on tour to perform in Hong Kong, Singapore, Shanghai, Chongqing, Chengdu, Shenzhen and other major venues. The performance met with overwhelming audience feedback and gratifying success at the box office.

The acquisition of the Fengchao Theatre in 2008 doubled the strength and the reach of “Meng Jinghui”. They had been performing more often and their fame continued to rise. Against a backdrop in which more and more local governments were showing ever greater interest in cultural and creative activities, Meng Jinghui Studio was invited to set up “branches” in Shanghai, Tianjin, Futian,

Shenzhen and other cities. These municipal governments favored the introduction of cultural resources to inspire and lead the development of local cultural enterprises.

For Meng, he wishes to spread his dramatic performances throughout China. And, as he observes, “Performances also need to become a regular practice. Only when a drama is constantly performed can we accumulate and cultivate the audience.” Although we can rightly say that Fengchao is the production line for “Meng Jinghui”, when the number of products reaches a certain level, they cannot be performed often if the venue is limited to Fengchao.

Moreover, as Ge observes, “Touring is like training in other places.” Nation-wide touring has been surging forward and achieving success in terms of both quantity and quality. In the past eight years, it has formed four touring troupes delivering a combined 700 performances annually to Beijing, Jiangsu, Zhejiang and Shanghai, and the southeastern coast of China, as well as the cities in Northeast, Southwest and Central China. The touring schedules for next year have already been confirmed this year.

When one looks at the drama market in China today, “Meng Jinghui” is unrivaled in terms of the scale of their tours. Its touring reach has been further expanded through the adoption of a “theatre circuit + operations autonomy” strategy that hinges on two key elements.

First element is financial. Ge says, “I have been working with Meng for 20 years but we have never discussed ticket sales or revenues once. We discuss the impact of our works and how to increase that impact. Never have we discussed how much investment to inject to which production or how much revenue we can derive from ticket sales.” As the person-in-charge for the operations, Ge’s highly dedicated spirit is reflected more in his stringent budget control than on revenue forecast. “There is a budget for all of our performances. That comes to a total of more than 50 budgets every year. I validate each of them myself and then strictly follow up by checking the budgets as they are being implemented. Budgets and ticket sales are two lines that are kept strictly separate; we do not compare the two. We just say the running period for each drama is 20 years, by which time we will surely have broken even.”

Second element is human resources. The team can be divided into several departments including performances, publicity, choreography, production and theatre

management. The working team for each tour is not fixed in advance but organized when needed. There will also be shifting of people from different departments to occupy different roles in the work flow according to the requirements of each particular tour. The standard crew size is 25 people, which can drop to a minimum of just seven people. In each case, the tour manager will take the primary responsibility for coordinating the rundown of the tour while the daily management of all staff will come under the departments to which they belong. As Ge explains, "Other than the performers, we may need to allocate seven to eight people to manage the start-up for each tour. When the tour starts to run smoothly, then we may just need three to five people. Our manpower estimates have become more accurate as we have gone along, especially since we have secured Fengchao as our performance venue".

As the top tier in Beijing's drama market, Meng Jinghui signs long-term contracts with performers in the name of the Studio to make large-scale touring possible. Another key success factor is the training of a highly capable production team. Ge sums up the situation clearly: "Each actor can prepare for roles in five to six productions. Meng Jinghui is terrifically accomplished in training performers. Many star artists in the mainland have become famous after performing in his works. As for choreography, lighting, sound effects, props and the like, we usually require our crew to support more than 20 productions at the same time. Here again, we handle all of the training ourselves. And every time we do large-scale touring, we make sure to get some new blood involved, as this is the best time to train our soldiers."

As the touring scale becomes larger and larger another challenge is to ensure the performance quality. The first control is that they send out the performing teams from Beijing instead of setting up local teams at the cities on the tours. "If the team is totally localized, then it will be difficult to guarantee the quality."

Secondly, Meng notes, it relies on stringent policies and operational structures to safeguard quality. "In this process, the conflict between business and arts cannot be avoided. If our touring performance is just a rough replica, I cannot tolerate it myself. If one treats the work merely as a job without feeling a passion for the arts, then it is not interesting anymore." In Meng's eyes, famed for producing pioneering works, having "no passion in the arts" is a crime in itself. Therefore, every time before a large tour, he has to meet with the team

to study their video recordings and analyze the plays prior to departure. Meng also makes a point to go to every premiere. One time, the tour for *Two Dogs* found itself in a city where no small theatre was available and they had to perform in a large one. To prepare, the team experimented at a large theatre in Beijing to test the actual experience before committing.

Thirdly, it is about performer training. "Touring is hard work for the actors, but we still have to urge them to show the appropriate passion and attitude. We need to help them develop a passion for the arts and awareness of their responsibilities when performing."

Meng is keenly aware that quality control is not something that can be achieved in one or two days. Moreover, the scale of the touring performances is growing increasingly larger, so he and Ge are facing such problems more and more often. "We still need more exploration. At the moment, we are still like a small workshop producing luxury handmade shoes, and not yet a corporation. We are still exploring, moving forward carefully step by step in an effort to find solutions and answers to many questions and problems."

Beijing Fringe Festival: Beyond the Market

Given the impressive touring figures, most people just see the commercial elements of "Meng Jinghui". However, for the young people who live in Beijing and love dramas, "Meng Jinghui" is still very artistic. The artistic elements of "Meng Jinghui", which avoids the mainstream styles, exist not only in his works but also on other large-scale platforms such as the Beijing Fringe Festival.

Beijing Fringe Festival, originally known as the Beijing Youth Drama Festival on its launching in 2008, is jointly hosted by the Beijing Federation of Literary and Art Circles and the National Theatre Company of China, and organized by the Beijing Theatre Association and the Beijing Young Dramatists Association. It is a wholly privately organized large-scale event whose mission is to provide an opportunity for young theatre professionals to display their talents. Meng Jinghui is meanwhile and President of the Beijing Young Dramatists Association and the Art Director of the Beijing Fringe Festival. As Meng recalls, "When I first started working on the Festival, I did not have a clear idea what I was going to do. I was simply looking for a non-commercial, non-profit

atmosphere. None of my plays has performed there. It just exists in order to develop young talents and attract new audience.”

In the first two Youth Drama Festivals held in 2008 and 2009, 30 stage performances were launched for 33 creative works in different styles, participated by 28 young directors and 720 theatre professionals.

In 2010, the Beijing Youth Drama Festival became the Beijing Fringe Festival and invited outstanding drama groups from Russia, Germany, Spain and South Korea, presented four creative productions by young talents from Hong Kong and Taiwan, whilst the local talents also performed in four productions by Nobel Literature laureate Harold Pinter. There were altogether 35 local and overseas productions performed in 12 theatres all over Beijing.

In 2011, the Festival shifted focus to young directors in order to provide them with a platform to showcase their works, together with a series of comprehensive programmes including stage work displays, literary readings, theatre education workshops and seminars on theatre development.

The 2012 Festival was the largest so far and involved the highest number of productions. More than 60 plays were staged in different divisions: ‘New works premieres’ (19 dramas), Rerun of well-received works (4), ‘International specials’ (12), ‘Avignon’ (5), Hong Kong and Taiwan (5), Tribute to August Strindberg (5), Chinese opera (2), and ‘Innovations’ (12). The ‘Innovations’ division was further divided into three sub-categories of ‘Monologue’, ‘Micro Theatre Rhapsody’ and the ‘World in Mirrors’.

Meng observes, “In the course of my participation over the past five years, I gradually discovered my hidden mission – to make the dreams of my younger days come true. If such a platform had existed in the past, I would have used it to express myself. However the opportunity was not available then given the monotonous theatre environment and lack of space for young people to stretch their wings. Through this Festival, I found that it is possible to make the cultural milieu more amiable and accessible.” This vision has been achieved through the five years of the “Youth Drama Festival”. Many young professional and amateur talents have been given access to make their career debut in the theatre industry. It has also fostered the development of a generation of new directors with their own distinctive styles such as Huang Ying, Zhao Miao, Shao Zehui, Wang Chong, and more.

During the Festivals in 2011 and 2012, Meng even organized visiting tours to the Avignon Festival in France to present the works by young directors as well as to survey different aspects of theatre production from scriptwriting, directing, costume-making, prop handling, etc. “After the journey, everyone obviously felt different and they quickly spread out into every nook and corner of the industry. They were influenced by the rich creativity and vitality of the foreign theatres. They had done their own work, but discovered there were much more to be done.” It can be said that Meng’s personal growth in his artistic journey has directly influenced his attitude toward the Festival.

In the 1990s, Meng experienced a period of low tide in creativity and decided to travel to Hong Kong and Japan. He recalls, “At that time I saw quite a lot and believed that I could do anything if given enough money and the right opportunities. So when I organized the Festival, I decided that it should be more diversified to offer greater variety to both the talents and the audiences. Even though the gaps in levels might be huge, I saw no problem in just letting more young people have a try. I wanted to tell them that it is not so difficult to produce a drama when you have talent and when you are young. Just let drama become an ordinary thing.”

It is for this idea, other than his own creations, that Meng devoted most of his effort to the Beijing Fringe Festival. Every year from September to October, Fengchao Theatre will reserve a few dozens of performance slots for the Festival. The team at Meng Jinghui Studio has also provided supporting services for the Festival for five years. As Meng puts it, “The Beijing Fringe Festival is an important balance for me. My Studio, its business operation, and its brand are all bound together and I gain from its success. When it comes to the Festival, however, my involvement brings me no direct benefit. I think of it as my contribution to the wider community, nurturing the vitality of the arts to make it flourish for the good. It is a fertilizer to the artistic soil.”