

# The relationship between Huaju art and social acceptance during the Isolated Island period

Chaoqun Yang<sup>1, a</sup>, Rosdeen Suboh<sup>1, b</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur.

<sup>a</sup> 18231056829@163.com, <sup>b</sup> s2176691@siswa.um.edu.my

**Abstract.** Huaju (Chinese spoken drama), as an imported art form, initially faced intense clashes with traditional Chinese opera upon its introduction to China. In its early stages, Huaju was marked by elitism, primarily catering to the upper social classes and intellectuals. However, during the Isolated Island period, Huaju experienced a significant shift toward popularization, focusing on the urban middle class. This transformation, while inevitable, was also coincidentally tied to the social acceptance of that time. This paper examines the relationship between Huaju art and social acceptance during the Isolated Island period using the cultural diamond theory. The findings reveal that the political stability, economic prosperity, and cultural diversity of the Isolated Island period created the conditions necessary for Huaju's popularization. Artists navigated a balance between market demand and personal artistic expression, producing works that resonated with the urban middle class. Simultaneously, the cultural consumption behaviors and aesthetic preferences of the audience played a crucial role in shaping the development of Huaju. This art form not only met the spiritual needs of the urban population but also contributed to the flourishing cultural market. This study provides a theoretical framework for understanding the transformation of art within specific socio-historical contexts and offers insights for contemporary cultural research and artistic practice.

**Keywords:** Chinese Huaju; Isolated Island period; popularization; social acceptance.

## 1. Introduction

In the early 20th century, the introduction of Huaju (spoken drama) marked a significant shift in China's theatrical landscape. The pioneers of Chinese Huaju, driven by a strong sense of social responsibility, championed ideas like "the people's drama" and "popular drama," aiming to create a form of theater that would resonate with the public and reflect their aspirations and struggles. However, a review of Huaju's century-long history reveals that it has predominantly exhibited trends of elitism and exclusivity, with grand narratives focused on national will and independence dominating the stage.

But can Huaju truly become "the people's drama"? From a contemporary perspective, the answer is affirmative. As society has progressed, the economic foundations and cultural awareness of the general public have gradually strengthened, and with the stabilization of political and market environments, Huaju has become increasingly understood and accepted by a broader audience. Yet, the shift of Chinese Huaju towards "popularization" occurred during a time of war, a unique and incidental phenomenon. Understanding the interplay between necessity and chance is crucial to grasping the popularization and evolution of Chinese Huaju.

The rapid development of Huaju during the Shanghai Isolated Island period<sup>1</sup> (1937-1941) was closely linked to the social acceptance of that era. During this time, Huaju primarily targeted the urban middle class as its main audience, seeking to attract and entertain them by reflecting real life through its themes and stagecraft, thus fulfilling their spiritual needs. Changes in market leadership, social structure, and administrative methods during the years 1937-1941 in Shanghai led to the emergence of numerous famous actors, playwrights, directors, and outstanding Huaju productions. Once an imported foreign art form, Huaju had gained social acceptance as a recognized form of performance art and had been embraced by businessmen as a profitable enterprise. The relaxation of political control and the strengthening of commercial profitability during the Isolated Island period bridged the gap between Huaju and the masses. The demand from an audience primarily composed

of urban citizens for the entertainment function of Huaju outweighed its roles in propaganda and education, making Huaju a tangible manifestation of popularized art during this period.

This study is grounded in the cultural diamond theory proposed by Victoria D. Alexander in *Sociology of the Arts* [1]. It analyzes the relationship between Chinese Huaju and social acceptance during the Isolated Island period—a time when Chinese Huaju was transitioning from an elitist to a popularized art form. This theoretical framework provides a basis for exploring the historical reasons behind the popularization of Chinese Huaju during this period.

## 2. Cultural diamond theory

The cultural diamond theory, proposed by Victoria D. Alexander, provides a framework for analyzing the relationship between art and social acceptance. This theory decomposes social acceptance into three interrelated components: social context, artists, and the audience. These elements interact with the artwork itself and with each other in complex ways. In this study, the cultural diamond theory is adapted as illustrated in Fig.1.

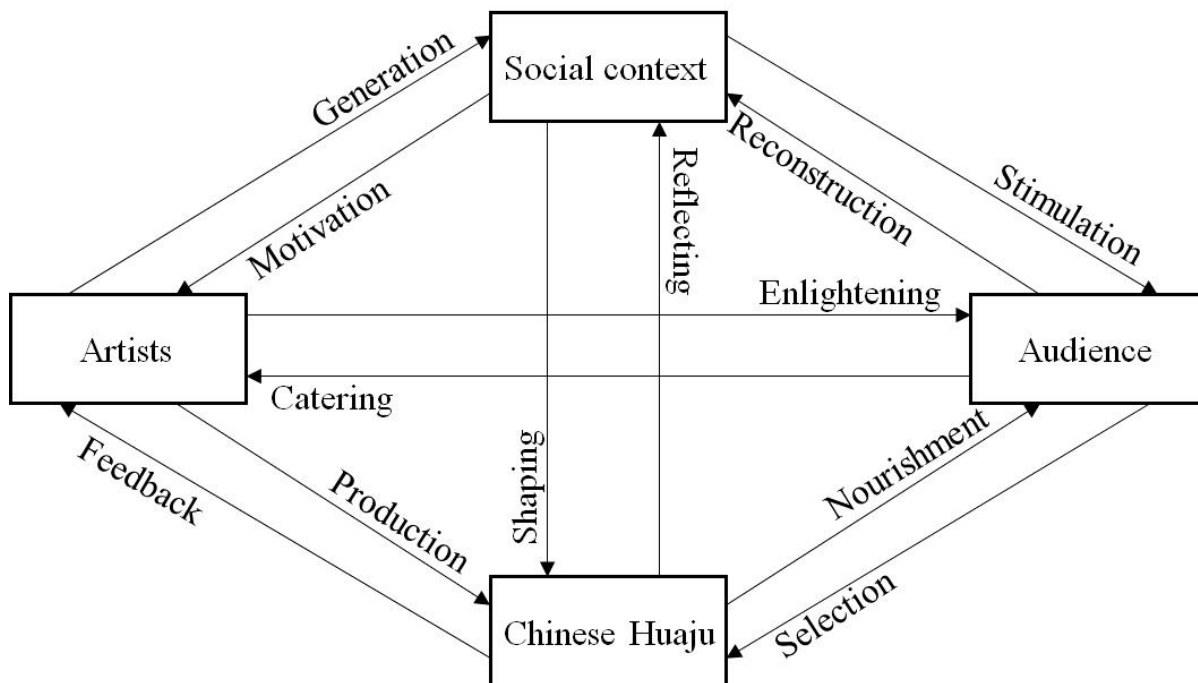


Fig. 1. Cultural diamond theory for Huaju during the isolated island period

**Social Context and Artists:** This relationship is termed "generation and motivation." Motivation refers to the influence and demands that the social context places on artists. Generation describes how artists proactively and voluntarily enhance their artistic creations in response to artistic or commercial demands.

**Social Context and Chinese Huaju:** This interaction is characterized as "shaping and reflecting." Shaping refers to how the social context influences Chinese Huaju, while reflecting denotes how Chinese Huaju documents and analyzes the social context.

**Social Context and the Audience:** This relationship is described as "stimulating and reconstructing." Stimulation pertains to the impact of the social context on the audience's consumption desires. Reconstruction involves the audience's influence on the cultural market.

**Artists and Chinese Huaju:** This connection is defined as "production and feedback". Production refers to the process by which artists create Chinese Huaju, while feedback encompasses the responses artists receive from the market circulation of their works.

**Artists and the Audience:** This relationship is characterized as "catering and enlightening." Enlightening describes the influence and mission that artists have on the audience. Catering refers to the audience's demands on artists for artistic production.

Chinese Huaju and the Audience: This relationship is characterized as "nourishment and selection". Nourishment is the main function of drama. Selection is the basic power that audience exercises over drama.

While not all these interactions may be present in any given period, both explicit and implicit mechanisms have contributed to the popularization of Chinese Huaju. Some of these contributions may have experienced delayed effects.

### **3. The relationship between Huaju and social acceptance**

#### **3.1 The Relationship between the Social Context and Artists during the Isolated Island Period**

The relationship between the social context and artists during the Isolated Island period (1937-1941) manifested in several significant ways:

(1) **Stable Political Environment:** The political stability of the Isolated Island period provided a conducive environment for the flourishing of theater troupes and elevated the social status of artists. According to Zhang Xiaou, the rapid expansion of professional and vocational Huaju during this time notably enhanced the status of its creators, allowing them to gain greater recognition and respect in society [2].

(2) **Economic Prosperity:** Economic growth during the Isolated Island period created a robust market for artistic endeavors. This prosperity established a stable consumer base that supported the expansion and development of Chinese Huaju. The economic boom provided artists with the resources and opportunities necessary to pursue their craft and reach a wider audience [3].

(3) **Rich Cultural Environment:** The Isolated Island period was marked by a vibrant and diverse cultural milieu in Shanghai. This rich cultural environment greatly enhanced the city's inclusiveness, as various cultural influences intertwined with native Chinese traditions. This amalgamation broadened the artistic perspectives of creators. As Wang Youyou remarked, the influence of modern education on artists was profound, as reflected in her willingness to embrace performance [4].

(4) **Rapid Urban Development:** The swift urbanization of Shanghai provided artists with a wealth of material, particularly in portraying the experiences of women and the coexistence of old and new values within the city. This dynamic urban landscape offered a rich tapestry for artistic exploration and expression [5].

(5) **Market-Driven Creation:** In response to the pressures of survival and market demands, artists often tailored their creations to align with consumer preferences. However, this necessity sometimes led to dissatisfaction with their own work. For example, Yu Ling critically evaluated his own creations, such as *Tears of Flowers* and *Women's Apartment*, revealing the tension between artistic integrity and market expectations [6].

(6) **Cultural Transformation:** During the Isolated Island period, artists were also at the forefront of cultural reforms, contributing to the development of social cultural theory and practices. This period saw a blend of elite culture and emerging urban popular culture, which sometimes led to conflicts as traditional and contemporary cultural values clashed [5].

These aspects illustrate how the social context of the Isolated Island period had a profound impact on artists, shaping their work and opportunities. Conversely, while artists influenced society through their creations, their impact was relatively limited compared to the strong external influences they faced.

#### **3.2 The Relationship between the Social Context and Chinese Huaju during the Isolated Island Period**

The relationship between the social context and Chinese Huaju during the Isolated Island period (1937-1941) is reflected in several key aspects:

(1) **Complex Cultural Environment:** The rich and diverse cultural milieu of the Isolated Island period greatly influenced the subjects and themes of Huaju. The period's cultural complexity

provided a wealth of material for artistic exploration. For example, Zhou Yibai's adaptation of Li Xiangjun aimed to mirror societal realities, drawing parallels between the state of society and the experiences of its people [7]. This fusion of various cultural elements allowed Huaju to address contemporary issues with greater depth and resonance.

(2) Conflicts of Values and Social Issues: The tension between traditional and modern values, as well as emerging social issues, became prominent themes in Huaju. Plays like *New Wife* examined the evolving roles of women within the family, highlighting shifts in gender dynamics. Similarly, *Women's Apartment* focused on the status and conditions of women, offering a critical reflection on gender issues and societal norms [5]. These works addressed the societal conflicts and transformations of the era, capturing the complexities of a changing world.

(3) Influence of Commodity Economy and Materialism: The rise of the commodity economy and a profit-driven mentality during the Isolated Island period had a notable impact on Huaju's narrative structures. For instance, *Beasts in Suits* explored how material desires influenced human behavior and morality [8]. The incorporation of themes related to materialism and economic concerns reflected the broader socio-economic conditions of the time, integrating these elements into the fabric of Huaju's storytelling.

(4) Stable Political Environment: The political stability of the Isolated Island period facilitated the development and performance of Huaju. Venues such as theaters in amusement parks and department stores became popular spaces for Huaju performances, providing artists with platforms to reach a diverse audience [9]. This stability enabled the flourishing of artistic endeavors by offering consistent opportunities for public engagement.

(5) Shift in Focus to Entertainment: During this period, the emphasis of small urban Huaju shifted from delivering profound philosophical messages to providing entertainment. This transition was driven by the consumption demands of the urban middle class, who sought light-hearted and engaging performances. The focus on entertainment reflected the changing tastes and preferences of the audience, aligning Huaju with contemporary entertainment trends [10].

(6) Economic and Social Analysis: Small urban Huaju also played a role in recording and analyzing the social dynamics of the Isolated Island period. These plays contributed to the promotion of consumption and production in related sectors, fostering an economic virtuous cycle. By reflecting on and engaging with the socio-economic landscape, Huaju helped drive both cultural and economic development [5].

In summary, the social context during the Isolated Island period had a profound influence on Huaju, shaping its themes, narratives, and performance venues. The economic contributions and historical significance of Huaju in this era highlight its role in both reflecting and shaping societal developments. The impact of these interactions underscores the importance of Huaju in understanding the broader cultural and economic landscape of the time.

### **3.3 The Relationship between the Social Context and the Audience during the Isolated Island Period**

The relationship between the social context and the audience during the Isolated Island period (1937-1941) is reflected in several significant aspects:

(1) Distorted Prosperity and Stable Environment: The peculiar form of prosperity and political stability within the foreign concessions during the Isolated Island period created a unique environment that heightened the entertainment needs of the urban middle class. This environment, characterized by both economic affluence and a stable yet isolated setting, led to a heightened demand for spiritual relief and novel experiences. As a result, entertainment forms such as Huaju thrived, catering to the evolving tastes of the urban populace [11].

(2) Weakened Ideological Control: The relaxation of ideological control during this period led to a marked increase in the public's pursuit of entertainment. This shift resulted in a phenomenon known as "compensatory migration," where Huaju emerged as a popular alternative to American

films. With fewer restrictions on cultural expression, Huaju gained prominence as a favored form of entertainment, reflecting the public's growing appetite for diverse and engaging content [12].

(3) Cultural Consumption by the Middle Class: The urban middle class, including small and medium-sized merchants, became the primary demographic during the Isolated Island period. Their increasing cultural consumption capacity and awareness significantly influenced the transformation of shopping malls, amusement parks, and theaters. This demographic's engagement with various forms of entertainment played a crucial role in shaping the cultural landscape of Shanghai [13].

(4) Aspirations for Modern Western Lifestyles: The urban middle class's cultural consumption was driven by their aspirations for modern Western lifestyles. This yearning for contemporary and cosmopolitan experiences made them the primary audience for Huaju during the Isolated Island period. Their desire for modernity and new cultural experiences greatly impacted the development and popularity of Huaju, as it aligned with their evolving tastes and expectations [14].

(5) Pursuit of Modern Urban Life: Shanghai's urban middle class, particularly professionals, actively sought modern urban experiences such as attending social parties, visiting dance halls, enjoying new plays, and watching films. These activities became fashionable, contributing to the burgeoning modern urban culture in Shanghai. The pursuit of such modern lifestyles reflected the broader cultural shifts occurring during this period.

(6) New Aesthetic Habits and Values: The new aesthetic preferences and values of the mainstream audience played a significant role in shaping and constraining the development of social culture. This dynamic created a mutually reinforcing relationship between audience tastes and cultural production, influencing the evolution of both artistic forms and societal norms.

In summary, the interplay between the social environment and the audience during the Isolated Island period was marked by a close and interactive relationship. The social context stimulated the audience's demand for entertainment, while the audience's aesthetic preferences and values, in turn, shaped the formation and development of the cultural landscape. This reciprocal influence highlights the significant impact of the audience on the evolution of Huaju and broader cultural trends during this unique historical period.

### **3.4 The Relationship between Artists and Chinese Huaju during the Isolated Island Period**

The relationship between artists and Chinese Huaju during the Isolated Island period (1937-1941) can be understood through several key dimensions:

(1) Dual Motivation for Creation: During the Isolated Island period, artists were driven by a blend of economic necessity and artistic ambition in their creation of Huaju. Their work aimed not only to satisfy market demands but also to gain recognition and respect within the artistic community. A notable example is Shi Hui, who initially turned to Huaju as a means of livelihood. However, as he immersed himself in the art form, he began to infuse his performances with deep personal and artistic expression. This fusion of life experience and creativity led to the creation of iconic roles, eventually earning him the prestigious title of "Emperor of Huaju" [15].

(2) Economic Returns from Huaju: The financial rewards that Huaju offered artists were both significant and immediate. These economic benefits were a powerful motivator, driving many artists to continue their involvement in the theater. For instance, Shi Hui received substantial salaries for his performances, reflecting the monetary value that successful Huaju productions could command. Similarly, the play *Thunderstorm* became a box office hit, with its sustained popularity translating directly into financial success for those involved [16].

(3) Subjective Artistic Feedback: While the economic rewards were clear and tangible, the artistic feedback artists received was often more subjective and nuanced. This feedback was typically rooted in how audiences perceived the artistic value of a work, which could be both rewarding and frustrating for creators. Yu Ling, for example, achieved commercial success with his plays *Tears of Flowers* and *Women's Apartment*. However, despite their market performance, Yu Ling felt a sense of artistic dissatisfaction, believing that these works did not fully allow him to

explore or express his deeper artistic ambitions [6]. This tension between market success and personal artistic fulfillment was a common theme among artists during this period.

(4) **Balancing Economic and Artistic Goals:** A significant challenge for artists during the Isolated Island period was finding the right balance between economic imperatives and artistic integrity. They were constantly exploring ways to create Huaju that would appeal to the cultural market while staying true to their artistic visions. This delicate balancing act involved experimenting with different artistic models, refining their craft to meet the dual demands of financial viability and creative expression.

(5) **Positive Feedback Loop:** The interaction between economic success and artistic fulfillment created a positive feedback loop for many artists. The financial and artistic recognition they received from their work in Huaju provided motivation to continue creating and innovating. This, in turn, contributed to the ongoing development of small urban Huaju, fostering a virtuous cycle of growth and creativity. As artists continued to push the boundaries of their craft, they not only advanced their careers but also played a vital role in the evolution of Huaju as an art form.

In conclusion, the relationship between artists and Huaju during the Isolated Island period exemplifies the intricate dance between market demands and personal artistic goals. Through their work, artists navigated these often competing forces, striving to achieve both economic success and artistic fulfillment. Their ability to garner audience recognition and market returns not only sustained their careers but also propelled the growth and development of Huaju in a challenging and dynamic cultural landscape.

### **3.5 The Relationship between Artists and Audiences during the Isolated Island Period**

The dynamic interplay between artists and audiences during the Isolated Island period (1937-1941) reveals a multifaceted relationship, primarily reflected in the following six aspects:

(1) **Audience Research and Adaptation:** During this period, artists began to place significant emphasis on understanding their audiences. By studying audience reception and analyzing psychological tendencies, they sought to refine the themes, subjects, and plots of Huaju to better resonate with the public. Yu Ling, for example, stressed the importance of staying attuned to the lives of ordinary citizens, recognizing that gaining audience approval was crucial for the success of Huaju. This approach marked a shift towards a more audience-centric method of artistic creation, where the needs and preferences of the viewers played a central role in shaping the content [17].

(2) **The "Popularization" Theory:** To forge a deeper connection with their audiences, artists advocated for the "popularization" of Huaju. This theory promoted the use of accessible methods to engage audiences without descending into pandering or lowbrow content. Artists believed that while art should strive to attract and engage the public, it should do so in a manner that maintained artistic integrity. The popularization of Huaju was seen as a way to bridge the gap between high art and the everyday experiences of the urban population, making theater more relatable and appealing to a broader audience [18].

(3) **Enhancing Dramatic Tension:** In an effort to captivate audiences, artists like Yu Ling focused on strengthening the dramatic tension within their plays. This was achieved by refining storylines and creating sharp contrasts in character fates, which heightened the emotional impact of the performances. Additionally, artists experimented with various themes to cater to the aesthetic preferences of urban audiences. For instance, the fictional story in *Kingdom of Women* was designed to appeal to the contemporary tastes of city dwellers, demonstrating the artists' adaptability and their commitment to keeping Huaju relevant and engaging [6].

(4) **Use of the Shanghai Dialect in Performances:** During the Isolated Island period, the incorporation of the Shanghai dialect into Huaju performances became a powerful tool for enhancing emotional resonance with local audiences. This linguistic choice was particularly effective in comedies, where the use of dialect not only conveyed humor more effectively but also deepened the connection with the audience. By speaking in a language that reflected the everyday

speech of the urban populace, artists were able to create a more immersive and relatable theatrical experience, further solidifying Huaju's appeal [19].

(5) Leveraging Star Power: Recognizing the draw of celebrity, artists and theater companies began to leverage star power to attract larger audiences. The China Travel Theater, for instance, employed a strategy of promoting plays featuring well-known playwrights, directors, and actors. Tang Ruoqing, a star actress of the time, became a major box office attraction, demonstrating the commercial success that could be achieved through star-driven productions. However, this focus on star power also introduced certain limitations, such as typecasting and a potential stagnation in artistic innovation, as roles were tailored to fit the personas of popular actors rather than pushing creative boundaries.

(6) Influencing Audience Morality and Aesthetic Taste: Beyond mere entertainment, artists during the Isolated Island period aimed to elevate the moral consciousness and aesthetic tastes of their audiences. Through their works, they sought to guide and refine the cultural sensibilities of the urban public. Despite the challenge of appealing to more culturally sophisticated viewers, who might have found content reflecting ordinary urban life less compelling, artists persisted in their efforts to raise the overall cultural awareness of the general populace. This mission underscored the dual role of Huaju as both a popular art form and a medium for social and moral education [19].

In conclusion, the relationship between artists and audiences during the Isolated Island period was characterized by a deep and reciprocal influence. Artists not only adapted their work to meet the expectations and tastes of their audiences but also sought to elevate and refine those tastes through their creative endeavors. This period marked a significant evolution in the interaction between creators and consumers of art, highlighting the crucial role of the audience in shaping the development of Huaju.

### **3.6 The Relationship between Chinese Huaju and Audiences During the Isolated Island Period**

The interaction between Chinese Huaju and its audiences during the Isolated Island period (1937-1941) can be understood through four key aspects:

(1) Therapeutic Social Function: During this turbulent era, Huaju served as more than just a form of entertainment; it played a vital therapeutic role for its audiences. In the midst of uncertainty and hardship, Huaju offered a form of spiritual fulfillment, providing emotional solace and a sense of relief. The narratives presented on stage resonated with the experiences of the audience, allowing them to momentarily escape their daily struggles and find comfort in shared stories and experiences [20].

(2) Audience-Driven Popularization: The audiences of the Isolated Island period were not passive consumers; they actively shaped the trajectory of Huaju's development. By choosing artistic products that aligned with their tastes and preferences, they played a crucial role in driving the popularization of Chinese Huaju. This phenomenon can be understood through Jauss's concept of the "horizon of expectation," which suggests that an audience's reception of a work is influenced by their previous artistic experiences, the prevailing social environment, and their personal social status. The success of Huaju during this period was thus closely tied to its ability to meet and sometimes challenge these expectations, creating a dynamic interplay between the art form and its viewers [9].

(3) Entertainment and Pleasure: As a prominent form of entertainment, Huaju catered to the spiritual needs of urban citizens living under the unique circumstances of the Isolated Island period. It provided joy and pleasure, becoming an essential part of urban culture. In a society that was undergoing rapid change and facing constant challenges, Huaju offered a welcome reprieve, allowing audiences to engage with stories that were both entertaining and reflective of their own lives. This connection between Huaju and the pursuit of happiness made it a beloved art form that was deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of the time [21].

(4) Cultural Satisfaction Across Social Strata: One of the most significant achievements of Huaju during the Isolated Island period was its ability to resonate with audiences across different social

strata. Whether from the upper echelons of society or the working-class, audiences found cultural satisfaction in citizen Huaju, which managed to create a balanced cultural ecosystem. This broad appeal facilitated the reproduction and expansion of Huaju, ensuring its continued relevance and success in a rapidly changing society. By catering to diverse audiences, Huaju not only sustained itself but also contributed to the cultural vitality of the period.

In summary, the relationship between Huaju and its audiences during the Isolated Island period was mutually beneficial. Huaju not only thrived due to audience engagement but also provided a much-needed respite from the harsh realities of the time, instilling in its viewers a renewed desire for life. This created a positive cycle of "nourishment" and "selection," where the audience's needs and the art form's evolution were in continuous, dynamic dialogue.

#### 4. Summary

This paper employs the Cultural Diamond Theory to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the intricate process through which Chinese Huaju transitioned from an elite art form to one embraced by the masses during the Isolated Island period. The study reveals that this transformation was not merely a natural outcome of heightened cultural awareness and economic development; it was also a product of the unique social conditions that characterized this era. During this period, a dynamic interplay emerged between Huaju, the broader social context, the creators, and the audience—each of which played a crucial role in the art form's popularization.

Firstly, the social backdrop of the Isolated Island period provided fertile ground for the flourishing of Huaju. The relative political stability, the abnormal economic prosperity, and the diversity of the cultural environment not only stimulated the audience's appetite for cultural consumption but also offered artists a wealth of creative material and a broad artistic perspective. These factors combined to create a conducive environment where Huaju could thrive.

Secondly, the artists of this era displayed a remarkable sensitivity to market demands while steadfastly pursuing their artistic goals. They endeavored to strike a delicate balance between economic necessity and artistic integrity, crafting works that were both commercially viable and artistically sound. This dual focus allowed them to produce Huaju that resonated with audiences and met high artistic standards.

Moreover, the audience, as the primary drivers of cultural consumption, had a direct impact on the themes, content, and forms of Huaju. Their preferences and expectations played a significant role in shaping the art form, thereby further accelerating its popularization.

The study also underscores the existence of a positive cycle of nourishment and selection between Huaju and its audience during the Isolated Island period. Huaju, by serving a vital social function, not only fulfilled the spiritual needs of the audience and alleviated their emotional distress but also elevated the moral consciousness and aesthetic preferences of the urban population. This reciprocal relationship not only fostered the development of Huaju as an art form but also enriched the cultural life of the time.

In conclusion, the transformation of Chinese Huaju during the Isolated Island period was the result of a complex interplay of multiple factors. It demonstrated the intricate relationship and mutual influence between art and society. The evolution of Huaju during this historical period provides valuable insights and profound lessons for understanding the broader dynamics of how art interacts with and is shaped by the social environment.

#### Note

1 The Isolated Island period, spanning from November 12, 1937, to December 8, 1941, refers to a unique era in Shanghai's history, encompassing the Shanghai International Settlement (under British and American control) and the French Concession. Bounded by Suzhou Creek to the north, the Huangpu River to the east, Jing'an Temple and Haige Road to the west, and Xujiahui Road and



Zhaojiabang Road to the south, this area stood out as a rare enclave of stability. While the rest of Shanghai and China were engulfed in war, these foreign-controlled zones existed like an isolated island, experiencing a distorted yet vibrant economic and cultural boom amid the surrounding turmoil.

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