

# Chinese Performing Arts

No. 2  
October 2020

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劇國

- Cao Yu: Pioneer of Modern Chinese Drama
- The 40-Year Global Spread of Cao Yu's Classics during Reform and Opening-up Era
- Wenmingxi (Civilized Theatre): The Early Form of Modern Chinese drama
- The Overview of Chinese Experimental Theater
- The Evergreen Tree on Chinese Drama Stage — Pu Cunxin
- Introduction to Classical Xiqu Plays (II)
- An Inventory of Chinese Theatre in 2019



国际戏剧协会  
International Theatre Institute ITI



上海戏剧学院  
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# The Development of Modern Chinese Drama

GONG BAORONG

The art of Chinese theatre can be traced back to the Han and Tang dynasties. It matured during the Song(960-1279) and Yuan(1279-1368) dynasties and reached its apex from the Ming dynasty to the middle of the Qing dynasty, but began to decline with the weakening of national strength at the end of Qing dynasty and the beginning of the Republic of China. Foreign art started to gradually spread in China with the beginning of the modernization process of the Chinese society in the middle of 1800s, when the country was forced to open to the world. In addition to the traditional Chinese theatre (or Xiqu)<sup>1</sup>, a new kind of stage art, later called “modern drama”, was born at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The imported art of modern drama in China has a history of 112 years since its advent. During its first half century, it played a significant role in Chinese society's modernization process; helping the nation transition from feudalism and colonialism to a sovereign state. After the founding of Modern China in 1949, modern drama has existed within a context of social upheaval, including the first 17 years of the initial stage of socialist construction, the “Cultural Revolution” from 1966 to 1976, and the 40 years since the reform and opening-up policy was initiated in 1978. This paper aims to briefly describe the development of Modern Chinese drama against this backdrop.

## I. The Birth and Growth of Modern Chinese drama

The turn of the twentieth century witnessed the increasing corruption and decline of the Qing dynasty. After China was forced to open to the outside world, Western

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<sup>1</sup> With singing being its main performing form, the traditional Chinese theatre is also called “Xiqu” (“qu” means “songs”), usually paralleled with modern Chinese drama as “Xiju and Xiqu (theatre and Xiqu)”, which is often disputed.

culture and art were gradually introduced into China, and a new trend of reforming the traditional Chinese theatre was set. Thus, the theatre reform and renovation movements represented by civilized theatre and new theatre arose. However, modern Chinese drama originated in neither Beijing nor Shanghai, but in Japan. Members of the “Chunliu Club” (“Chunliu” means the willows in spring), established by Li Shutong, Zeng Xiaogu and others, staged parts of *The Lady of the Camellias* written by Alexandre Dumas, a French writer, and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, by the American Harriet Beecher Stowe, in Tokyo in 1907. In the same year, the “Chunyang Club” (“Chunyang” means the sun in spring), founded by Wang Zhongsheng and others, also staged *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in Shanghai. This can be seen as the birth of modern theatre in China, and shows the key influence Japan’s performing arts scene had on our own at such an early stage.

Later, some performances called “New Theatre” or “Civilized Theatre” at that time, were staged in cities such as Shanghai, Beijing, Tianjin, Shenyang, Nanjing and Wuhan. Some organizations for new theatres like the Evolution Group, the Nankai New Troupe, and the Comrades Association for New Theatres were formed, and some plays advocating new ideas and social changes like *Blood*, *The Spring and Autumn of the Mainland* and *The Republic Turns One Year Old* were created and performed. Ouyang Yuqian, the representative figure during this period, devoted himself to publicizing the art of modern drama by setting up troupes, training performers and appearing on stage with them in Dalian, Shenyang and other cities in northeast China after returning from Japan, greatly promoting the development of local modern drama.

The “May Fourth Movement”, which is of great significance, occurred in 1919, laying the groundwork for the wider New Culture Movement, for which the new theatre played an indispensable role. During the year of 1919, with the vigorous promotion of “amateur theatre” by Ouyang Yuqian, Chen Dabei and others, clubs like Popular Theatre Clubs, Experimental Theatre Clubs, Xinyou Theatre Clubs and South Theatre Clubs were set up in Shanghai, Beijing and other places, which set a trend. Influenced by the spirit of the “May Fourth Movement”, people like Hu Shi and Chen Duxiu attached great importance to the internal power of the new theatre to enlighten people’s minds and transform society, so they made great efforts to highly praise Ibsen and his social theatre. They not only published special numbers and articles in *New Youth* magazine, but also put Ibsenism into practice by creating their own works.

This gave birth to the first batch of excellent plays in the history of modern Chinese theatre, such as *Once in a Lifetime* written by Hu Shi, *The Night of Catching a “Tiger”* and *The Death of a Renowned Play Performer* by Tian Han, *Three Rebellious Women* by Guo Moruo, *Be Patriotic* by Xiong Foxi, *A Wasp* by Ding Xilin and so on. Consequently, thanks to the promotion of the students studying in the US like Hong

Shen, the creation of a modern theatre system, including stage art, performance and direction, began to take shape in the 1920s. The Beijing School of Fine Arts, founded in 1918, evolved into a specialized school for arts in Beijing in 1925, when the Department of Theatre and Department of Music were established, marking the beginning of the history of Chinese theatre education. Meanwhile, Tian Han set up South Art School and South Club in Shanghai.

These organizations fostered a group of key talents for the modern drama and film industries. After the South Club was closed in 1930 and the left-wing troupe was reorganized into the Left-Wing Dramatists' Alliance by Tian Han. Chinese theatre was further related to the society and the political left under the influence of proletarian literature from the Soviet Union, Japan, and other countries, as well as at the behest of the Communist Party of China.

“Modern Drama” was officially named and widely accepted by the theatre community in 1928. This new art-form began to mature in the 1930s after thirty years of development, which can be seen from the following aspects;

Firstly, the performances and directorial skills were improved with the birth of professional troupes. As mentioned before, “amateur theatre” came into being so as to overcome the tendency that the early civilized theatre catered for commercialization and made use of vulgar content. However, “amateur theatre” was innately unprofessional and temporary, thus this art was so ordinary in quality that it could not satisfy the audience. Tang Huaiqiu and others established the first professional troupe in the history of modern Chinese theatre—the China Travel Troupe—in Shanghai in November, 1933. This troupe, in imitation of the European troupes, totally relied on the performance income to tour and maintain the living of its acting and administrative staff. From the spring in 1934, this troupe toured cities including Nanjing, Tianjin, Shijiazhuang and Beijing, and performed over thirty plays of both Chinese and foreign styles like *The Death of a Renowned Play Performer* by Tian Han, *Thunderstorm* and *Sunrise* by Cao Yu, *Mei Luoxiang* by Gu Zhongyi, *The Lady of the Camellias* by Ouyang Yuqian and *The Young Mistress' Fan* by Hong Shen.

Secondly, the theatrical literature represented by Cao Yu's works reached maturity. *Thunderstorm* was created by Cao Yu in 1933 when he was only 23 and still studying at Tsinghua University, and was staged at the theatrical clubs by college students in Tianjin and Shanghai in 1935. The performance by the China Travel Troupe in Tianjin and Shanghai in the same year was even more successful and created a sensation. Therefore, Chinese theatre matured in the first half of the 1930s, which was not only reflected in the success of both the content and form of plays, but also in the improvement of performance quality and directorial ability. It was such professional troupes like the China Travel Troupe that made Cao Yu's



plays come into being at the right time, achieving resounding success.

Other significant events related to theatre also include the exploration of “Farmer’s Theatre” led by Xiong Foxi in Dingxian County in Hebei Province after the closure of the Department of Theatre in Peiping Art Specialized School. This was compounded by the publication of some theatrical magazines including *The Era of Theatre*, *Modern Theatre Performing* and *Theatre* and the birth of some professional theoretical works such as *The Directing Technique of Theatre* by Xiang Peiliang, *Random Reading of Theatre* by Yuan Muzhi and *28 Questions About Writing Plays* by Hong Shen.

We can say, therefore, that the 1930s is when modern Chinese theatre fully developed from cities to rural areas and from theory to practice.

With the outbreak of the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression in 1937, the Chinese theatre entered a special period. Contrary to people’s expectation, theatre did not suffer from the war but became the most active art form due to its close connection to ongoing events. The author of *The Historical Draft of Modern Chinese Theatre* thought that “Modern Chinese theatre represented by modern drama went into a golden era of unprecedented popularity and prosperity during the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression through the embryonic period at the beginning of this century, the development period during the May Fourth Movement and in the 1920s, and the maturity period in the 1930s”.<sup>1</sup>

Because of the situation, the original “national defence theatre” developed into the anti-Japanese war theatre movement. Of the 13 national salvation troupes set up in Shanghai, 10 went to all parts of China to conduct anti-Japanese propaganda activities and give performances. Wuhan, following Shanghai, became Free China’s new theatre centre. China’s National Association of the Theatre Community Against Japanese Aggression was established at the end of 1937. Later, the major cities set up branches of the Association. Furthermore, Wuhan, Guilin, Chongqing and other cities held the China Theatre Festival.

Perhaps these special circumstances led the theatre community in China to start to articulate the nationalization and popularization of modern drama and produced a great number of outstanding playwrights and works. The playwrights are represented by Guo Moruo (*Qu Yuan* and *Tiger Tally*), Xia Yan (*Under the Roof in Shanghai* and *The Bacteria of Fascists*), Yang Hansheng (*The Spring and Autumn of the Heavenly Kingdom* and *Greenwood Heroes*), Aying (*Li Zicheng*), Yu Ling (*Shanghai at Night*),

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1 Chen Baichen & Dong Jian (Chief editors). *The Draft of Modern Chinese Theatre History*, China Theatre Press, 1989, p.432.

Chen Baichen (*The Story of Li Zhusun* and *The Map of Promotion*), Song Zhidi (*Chongqing in Fog*), Wu Zuguang (*Returning Home on a Snowy Night*) and many others.

## II. The Rise, Fall and Rebirth of Modern Drama in New China

With the establishment of the People's Republic of China under the leadership of Communist Party of China in October 1949, the theatre industry reached a new stage in its development.

During that period, theatres and modern drama troupes were set up in large cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Wuhan, Guangzhou and Shenyang, and the creation staff gradually embarked on the path of specialization. Two institutions of higher learning, aimed to train playwrights, performers and stage art talents, were also created in Beijing and Shanghai, namely The Central Academy of Drama (Beijing) and the Shanghai Theatre Academy, which still play a leading role today.

However, against the special historical background at that time, the plays created were apparently targeted to give publicity and eulogize. In addition, China was implementing a one-sided policy towards the Soviet Union. Therefore, the domestic plays were all about socialist construction, while the foreign plays staged were products of the USSR, the dominant creation method of which was naturally "socialist realism", where the performing and directing style was also placed under the guidance of Soviet experts.

The older generation of playwrights attempted to add elements in the new era to their creation, while the young playwrights directly described the new lives of workers and farmers. By the mid-1950s, with the introduction of the policy of "giving free reign to all styles of art and all schools of thought", lots of excellent works, including *Teahouse* by Lao She, *Cai Wenji* by Guo Moruo and *Guan Hanqing* by Tian Han, were born in that particular era.

However, due to the shocks caused by a series of political movements such as the Great Leap Forward (1958-1960), the quality of modern drama created declined so much that the Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China and Ministry of Culture held relevant conferences in Beijing in 1961 and in Guangzhou in 1962. In fact, Premier Zhou Enlai attended these in person, and he gave speeches to encourage playwrights to create fine works. The two conferences, especially the one held in Guangzhou, played a particularly important role in reviving playwrights' morale and confidence. However, it was not long before the whole country was plunged into a "decade of turmoil" from 1966 to 1976. Modern drama fell into a

period of neglect.

China entered the new era of reform and opening-up in 1978. As domestic modern drama works, like Zong Fuxian's *In Silence* and Sha Yexin's *Mayor Chen Yi*, reflected the true voice of the people, and foreign plays written by A. Miller, B. Brecht, and F. Dürrenmatt were staged, modern dramas were warmly welcomed.

As the Chinese saying goes, however, "good fortune is where misfortune lies". With the popularity of television, the new art represented by TV series entered the household of every family, while modern drama was gradually neglected due to its adherence to tradition. Facing the choices of either actively making explorations to be reborn or passively waiting for doom, the artists chose the former, carrying out lots of experiments to find a way forward.

*The Absolute Signal*, written by Gao Xingjian staged by Lin Zhaochua at the Capital Theatre of Beijing People's Art Theatre in 1982, the "experimental theatre" movement of special significance got started, and an increasing number of people were keen on "exploratory drama". It is worth noting that this innovation movement was both driven by the development needs of theatre itself and inspired by the thoughts and practice of the Western theatre. At that time, a great number of Western theatrical works and plays about modern and contemporary theatre were translated into Chinese, which became important references for modern drama artists to make creations. Influenced by the theatre of surrealism, expressionism, absurdism and others, widely acclaimed plays such as *Warm Current Outside the House* by Ma Zhongjun and others, *A Dead Man Visits the Living* by Liu Shugang, and *A Peasant Named Chen Hexiang* by Liu Jinyun became known; inspired by narrative theatre, existentialism and absurd theatre, some new works like *The Top Restaurant* by He Jiping, *Chinese Dream* by Sun Huizhu, and *The Station* by Gao Xingjian came out.

In fact, the theatre innovation movement in the 1980s not only took place at the level of ideas and plays, but also at the level of performing and directing. As mentioned before, during the first ten years after the founding of New China, the Russian realist performing and directing mode represented by Stanislavski's System took deep root in China because of China's implementation of a one-sided policy towards the Soviet Union and the instruction of Soviet experts. Later, under the guidance of ultra-Left ideology, this system was alienated into a rigid and dogmatic creation method, making the performing methods on the Chinese stage in the 1980s seem so backward that Arthur Miller considered himself the most forward-looking dramatist when he first came to China.

It would take time to revitalize all that needed to be changed. After the reform and opening-up policy was initiated in China in 1978, Brecht and his narrative theatre was introduced into China. Brecht's *Leben des Galilei* was the first foreign play staged in China in the new era, and later, ancient Greek tragedies and contemporary

German theatre were staged in Beijing.

In addition, although previously valued in an academic context, the first national Shakespeare Theatre Festival was held by Shanghai Theatre Academy and others in 1986. All laid the foundations for innovating the performing and directing art of Chinese theatre. *Macbeth* and *Peer Gynt*, directed by Xu Xiaozhong, a professor from The Central Academy of Drama, achieved great success. *The Chronicle of Sangshuping Village* written by Chen Zidu and others is regarded as a milestone work of contemporary Chinese direction. The play achieved a huge breakthrough in aspects including, performance, direction, and stage art, combining the method of narrative theatre, the technique of freehand brushwork in traditional Chinese painting and the filming technique. This play symbolized the peak of innovation in the field of modern drama, playing a leading role in promoting the development of Modern Chinese drama.

Nothing can go right along all the time. Despite the insiders' efforts since the 1980s and the fact that the first "Experimental Theatre Festival" was held in Nanjing in the spring of 1989, the modern theatre crisis persisted, which worsened due to the further promotion of a market economy and the reform of the state-owned theatres and troupes. However, under the double-track system, some outstanding plays of national influence came out during the 1990s.

An important representative figure during the first half of the 1990s is Guo Shixing. His "A Trilogy of Carefree Man"—*Bird Man*, *Go Man*, and *Fish Man*, was deeply influenced by people like Friedrich Dürrenmatt and was marked by the imprint of Zhuangzi and Zen sects. Another important playwright is Yao Yuan, a military writer, whose play, *Shang Yang*, gave him great renown. This play represents the fate of heroes like Shang Yang, who implemented reform to strengthen the country. Through narrating the anecdotes of the past, it alludes to the present to praise people who carry out the reform and opening-up policy. The play also led to the success of its director, Chen Xinyi, and started the era of directors in China. Additionally, Tian Qinxin, a playwright and director, came to the fore in the theatre industry in Beijing, with *To Make Painful Self-adjustments*, *Peach Blossoms at the Posthouse*, especially *The Field of Life and Death* establishing her current status as the number one director in China. Under the influence of the market economy, Meng Jinghui, a director from National Theatre of China, wrote and directed *Sifan* and he enjoyed fame for a time. Meng played a leading role on the stage of modern Chinese drama with his *The Accidental Death of an Anarchist* and *Rhinoceros in Love* at the end of the 1990s.

In the new century, with China's rapid economic growth and the continuous improvement of people's living standards, performing arts, with modern drama included, have made great progress, and the recovery and development of modern theatre has exceeded the expectations of many professionals. The strong



substitution of Mandarin for dialects has brought a much wider audience for the modern productions, which is in sharp contrast to the lack of young viewers for traditional Chinese theatre, which is based on dialect. However, the pity is that the modern drama activities are still mainly conducted in Beijing and Shanghai.

Nearly all of the representative playwrights and directors during the past twenty years come from Beijing or Shanghai. For example, Lin Zhaohua, devoting himself more to the deconstruction experiment of traditional Western theatre, still maintained his expertise in theatre; Tian Qinxin and Meng Jinghui, who began to display their remarkable talents in theatre at the end of last century, together with Wang Xiaoying and Zha Mingzhe, played an important role in staging theatre, and Tian and Meng attracted infinite attention because their status as both playwright and director. The representative works over the past two decades include *Two Dogs' Opinions of Human Being's Life* by Meng Jinghui, *Fayuan Temple in Beijing* by Tian Qinxin, *The Plain of White Deer* by Meng Bing, *Wotou Multi-household Compound* by Liu Heng and so on. There were lots of works staged in Shanghai, but those works were a bit less original, with Zhao Yaomin (*Fine Moments and Beautiful Scenery* and *The Everlasting Regret*) and Yu Rongjun (*The Salty Taste of Cappuccino* and *Last Winter*) being the representative figures.

What has garnered considerable attention in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is what is called "Twice Impacts from the West" by some experts, namely the fact that an unprecedented number of foreign troupes have given performances on the modern Chinese drama stage. Each year, outstanding plays from European countries and America are invited to be staged at theatre festivals including Shanghai International Experimental Theatre Festival and International Art Festival, Penghao Theatre Festival and Les Rencontres du Théâtre Français in Beijing, Cao Yu Theatre Festival in Tianjin, and of course Wuzhen Theatre Festival, where foreign plays along with original local plays are presented on the contemporary Chinese stage, drawing praise from the audience.

It can be foreseen that the modern Chinese drama will stand out among all types of theatre across the globe with its unique charm in the future.

With its past as precedent, it is hoped Chinese drama will continue its development, and that its long and varied history will be the basis of its charm to attract audiences across the globe.

GONG BAORONG  
Professor of Shanghai Theatre Academy

# Cao Yu: Pioneer of Modern Chinese Drama

LI RURU



Cao Yu (or Ts'ao Yu, 1910-1996) was the foremost pioneer of modern drama in China. His life and career exemplify the dilemmas and difficulties faced by generations of Chinese intellectuals throughout the twentieth century.

In rejection of China's indigenous tradition of song-and-dance theatre (or *xiqu* in the Chinese term), enthusiastic young radicals in the early twentieth century had begun to develop a more "civilized theatre" on the Western model called "spoken drama". However, despite being promoted as representing the spirit of a changing society, spoken drama had struggled to compete against the established indigenous operatic genres and the increasingly popular movie industry. In the 1930s, the plays of Cao Yu emerged as the saviour of the movement since their plots and characters possessed immediate and widespread appeal to Chinese audiences. His work helped spoken drama gain a permanent place in contemporary Chinese culture.

Often compared to Shakespeare, Ibsen, Chekhov and O'Neill, Cao Yu gained canonical status in China due to the artistry of his writing and the skilful fusion of contemporary political and social themes in his early plays. His powerful portrayal of people and exploration of human complexity still touch the hearts of twenty-first-century audiences. Cao Yu is the only spoken drama playwright whose works have been constantly revived since they were first staged in the 1930s.

Cao Yu—original name Wan Jiabao—was born into an upper-class family. His

natural mother died three days after his birth, a loss he felt deeply all his life. Describing himself as a lonely little boy living in a huge tall-ceilinged mansion, Cao Yu existed through the stories told to him by his nanny, a poor woman from the countryside, and in the world of his own imagination. He became alert to the behaviour of adults, especially how people's attitudes towards his parents changed according to their wealth or poverty. Childhood loneliness in this cold home environment had left him prone to depression, and as a young man he increasingly perceived the alienation of the individual in confrontation with the external world. His exploration of this theme was at the heart of much of his writing. An acute observer of human life, Cao Yu created all his characters on the basis of his own experience. Chinese artists of his generation could not afford to indulge in art for art's sake.

In 1930, he gave up his study of politics, and entered the Department of Western Languages and Literatures at Tsinghua University in Beijing. At the age of twenty-three, he completed his first work: the ground-breaking spoken drama *Thunderstorm*, which was published in 1934. Chinese students in Tokyo performed a Japanese translation in 1935 before the play's professional premiere in China later that year. *Thunderstorm* became China's most important modern play and established the prestige and popularity of spoken drama in the 1930s. Over the next ten years, Cao Yu's playwriting flourished in spite of the disruption of the Second Sino-Japanese War, and his plays gained international recognition being staged in many cities including Moscow and Tokyo. In 1946, invited by the U.S. State Department, Cao Yu, along with novelist Lao She, lectured in the United States.



■ Molière's *The Miser* re-written and acted by Cao Yu (right), 1935

Communist victory in 1949 ended China's years of civil war. Thereafter—apart from the Cultural Revolution period (1966-76)—Cao Yu held numerous high official positions right up to his death in 1996: president of the Beijing People's Art Theatre (China's most prestigious spoken drama company) from 1952; chairman of the All-China Dramatic Workers' Association from 1978; deputy of the National People's Congress from 1954, and member of its standing committee from 1978. Yet his creativeness was eroded by the ever-shifting political climate and he wrote only three plays during the last five decades of his life.

### From acting to playwriting

When just three years old, Cao Yu started accompanying his stepmother to the theatre. He was fascinated by the variety of Xiqu and its distinctive songs, dance and



■ Galsworthy's *Silver Box*  
translated, directed and acted by Cao  
Yu (right), 1933



■ Cao Yu as Mozart in *Requiem*, 1943



acrobatics. Subsequently, at the Nankai Middle School in Tianjin, he became an active member of the drama club and his first major role was the female character Petra in Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*.

Acting led Cao Yu to the study of original Western masterpieces: with the aid of dictionaries he read Ibsen, O'Neill, Galsworthy, Chekhov, Shakespeare and Greek tragedies. Enthralled by the power of artistic expression, profound characters and the significant social and political immediacy the Western style of "spoken drama" offers, he decided to "borrow the golden threads from foreign masters" to make his own "humble coat"<sup>1</sup> as a playwright.

### Cao Yu's Major Theatrical Works:

#### ◆ *Thunderstorm* (1934)

In the summer of 1933 before his graduation from the Department of Western Languages and Literatures, Cao Yu stayed in the library at Tsinghua University to complete his maiden play *Thunderstorm*, which he had been planning and thinking about over the previous five years.

*Thunderstorm*, a four-act play, looks to the three unities to provide the foundation for expounding a complex story involving family hierarchies, adultery, incest, threatened murder and labour unrest. The relationships between masters and servants, as



■ *Thunderstorm*, 1954



■ *Thunderstorm*, 1981

1 Tian Benxiang, Liu Yijun(Ed). The Complete Works of Cao Yu (Volume 1). Huashan Literature and Art Press, 1996, pp.5-6.

well as between stepmother and stepson, not only reveal love and hatred but also embed an exploration of fate within a plot that exposes the oppressive realities of contemporary society. The themes reflect the spirit of iconoclasm in the 1920s and 1930s which advocated the liberation of the individual from the patriarchal family and the emancipation of workers from capitalist exploitation. The drama's tragic ending, inspired in part by Greek tragedy, is also a meditation upon fate. Cao recalled,

I was not clearly aware that I wanted to rectify, satirize, or attack anything. Near the end of the writing, however, there seemed to be an emotional surge pushing me forward, and I was releasing and transforming my suppressed anger into bitter denunciation of the Chinese family and society. In the beginning when I began to form a vague image of *Thunderstorm*, what interested me were a couple of episodes, a few characters, as well as a complex and aboriginal sentiment.

To me, *Thunderstorm* was the lure. The sentiment that came along with *Thunderstorm* formed my imagination, which I found difficult to describe, about the mysteries in the universe. *Thunderstorm* can be regarded as the remains of the primitiveness in me.<sup>1</sup>

Since its premiere on the Chinese professional stage in 1935, *Thunderstorm* has been revived constantly (except during the Cultural Revolution). Many celebrated actors have claimed they learned how to portray characters from acting in this play. *Thunderstorm* has also been adapted into regional musical theatres, traditional Chinese story-telling/ballad-singing performance art, Western opera, ballet and film.

#### ◆ *Sunrise* (1936)

*Sunrise*, another four-act play, was first serialized in the *Literary Monthly*.

Greatly shocked by the suicides of two young female film stars who had been the target of merciless gossip in the tabloid press, Cao Yu poured his empathy into *Sunrise*'s heroine, Chen Bailu. Groups of people including bankers, clerks, university students, workers, prostitutes and mafia figures revolve around Chen, a student-turned-courtesan, who lives in a luxury hotel, supported by a wealthy banker. Later, faced with her benefactor's bankruptcy, Chen commits suicide. Presenting vivid scenes of contemporary Chinese metropolitan life, the play studies evil and suffering, and conveys a strong social message: the need to rebel against the ruling plutocrats.

Cao Yu outlined his intentions in this play by eight quotations, the first and last of which are as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 6-7.



■ *Sunrise*, 1956



■ *Sunrise*, 1981

For thus the way of God  
Cuts people down when they have had too much  
And fills the bowls of those who are in want.  
But the way of man will not work like this:  
The people who have not enough are despoiled  
For tribute to the rich and surfeited.

- Laozi *Magnum opus on Taoism*

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first  
earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

- *Book of Revelations 21:1*

*Sunrise* has been adapted into regional song-dance theatres, film and Western-styled musical concert.

#### ◆ *The Wilderness* (1937)

This three-act play is the only work written by Cao Yu that is set in the countryside of northern China. The playwright said,

Having decided not to repeat myself, I thought that the style of *The Wilderness* should be different from my previous two plays. I wanted to create an artistic image: an ugly man does not have to be ugly-hearted... However, there was no way for him to survive. He committed suicide.<sup>1</sup>

1 Tian Benxiang. *Biography of Cao Yu*. Beijing October Literature and Art Press, 1994, pp.206-208.



■ *Metamorphosis*, 1987

Superficially a story of a peasant's revenge, it interweaves darkness, nightmare, fear and mystery in the style of expressionist theatre. The heart of the play remains the playwright's philosophical obsession with fate and cosmic cruelty. While the plot relates the protagonist's deliberation, preparation and execution of his vengeance, and his consequent feelings of guilt and eventual suicide, dramatic colour is added through the rivalry for exclusive affection between a possessive old mother and a beautiful but jealous wife, as well as the primitive passions, sexual deprivation and defiant courage of life in this remote environment. *The Wilderness* has thus afforded rich opportunities for adaptations into film, Western opera, Peking Opera (or Jingju) and other regional theatres.

#### ◆ *Metamorphosis* (1940)

By December 1937, the adverse course of the Sino-Japanese war had forced the Nationalist government to retreat from its capital Nanjing. Cao Yu and the National Drama School withdrew to Jiang'an, a distant county in south-western China, where staff and students staged a series of new performances to entertain wartime audiences.

Written in 1940, *Metamorphosis* is an ode to the patriotism of the Chinese people. As in his earlier plays about social problems, Cao Yu takes a critical stance and attacks irresponsible administrators and corruption in a military hospital. This four-act drama focuses on two selfless heroes: a warm-hearted, caring doctor and an upright official. Through their struggle and ultimate success, the play presents an optimistic picture to worried audiences with the doctor's cry: "China, China, you will be strong!"

About the play and the play title, Cao Yu commented in the postscript to the published play script in 1940,

In the natural world, there is a biological process. Many insects have to get



rid of their old skin in order to develop their new life. This is what I meant by metamorphosis. We do not know what sense insects have of this process, but we can imagine that they may feel great anxiety before abrupt changes as the new life starts forming in them.

...This chapter of history, written in blood and sweat, and profuse in heroic and pathetic events, manifests the hardship that our national warriors have encountered on every frontier of their strife, as well as the despair of the degenerate class in the process of its elimination.<sup>1</sup>

Both left-wing and Nationalist critics reacted severely to the play, as did those who sought purely artistic value. In spite of this, *Metamorphosis* proved extremely popular with audiences who saw the hope that they needed at the time.

#### ◆ *Peking Man* (1941)

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



■ *Peking Man*, 1957



■ *Peking Man*, 1990

1 Tian Benxiang, Liu Yijun(Ed). *The Complete Works of Cao Yu* (Volume 1). Huashan Literature and Art Press, 1996, pp. 357-358.

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

About this play and his own writing, Cao Yu said at an interview with scholar Tian Benxiang,

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

#### ◆ *The Family* (1942)

Cao Yu’s four-act play *The Family* was adapted from the famous novel of that name by Ba Jin. In 1934, Ba Jin had been the first to recognize Cao Yu’s talent as a playwright when he published the young man’s *Thunderstorm* in the Literary Quarterly, and the two became soul mates for the rest of their lives.

Cao Yu remembered vividly how he wrote this play,

I remember it was in 1942 during the steaming hot days in Chongqing. I wrote *The Family* on a boat anchored in the Yangzi River...The crew



■ *The Family*, 1954



■ *Bright Skies*, 1954



■ *Bright Skies*, 1954

members saw me hunched over a small table day and night, sweat rolling down on my bare back. A middle-aged man said to me: “Gosh! You really work hard writing your plays.” In my life, I’ve forgotten many things that I should have remembered, but this sentence, perhaps for the man’s sincerity, has lived in my mind ever since.<sup>1</sup>

Set in the socio-political turmoil of China in the 1920s, *The Family* explores the entire ambit of love, ranging from frustration to fulfilment, and from pretended affection to complete devotion. Love, treated with sympathy and warmth in beautiful poetic language, is contrasted against the all-pervading conflicts between generations, between tradition and modernity, and between the family and the individual. The tragedy of two young women and their innocent deaths demonstrate that the old “family” is a “prison” needing to be condemned and demolished.

Monologues from this play are regularly used in speech classes for drama students.

#### ◆ *Bright Skies* (1954)

On 1<sup>st</sup> October 1949, Mao Zedong, standing on the Tian’anmen Rostrum, proclaimed the foundation of the People’s Republic of China, launching the whole nation on a process of tremendous and continual change. Cao Yu tried his utmost to adapt to the new ideology.

1 Cao Yu. For the Memory that I will Never Forget. *The Wenhui Daily*, 6<sup>th</sup> August, 1978.

The three-act play *Bright Skies* is set in a famous medical college in Beijing. It begins on the eve of the Communist takeover and ends in 1951 at the most intense phase of the Korean War. Cao Yu's depiction of people and their lives during these years reveals how the Nationalist community adapted itself to Communist priorities, and how Chinese intellectuals underwent "thought reform" to conform to the new society.

Even after three decades, Cao Yu still remembered the difficult process when he tried his utmost to write the play. He said to Scholar Tian,

I found *Bright Skies* very difficult to write. I went to the hospital for my fieldwork, and collected loads of material. However, I had no way to refine it to make a story. I was myself a person who needed to be reformed, and so how could I write a play depicting how other intellectuals managed to transform themselves through thought reform?... I still cannot work out that play.<sup>1</sup>

#### ◆ *Courage and the Sword* (1961)

By the late 1950s and early 1960s China was a nation of young people, detached from the past and ready to compete with the outside world. At the same time, the country had experienced the greatest difficulties with its economy and international relations. Following the disastrous Great Leap Forward campaign, China suffered unprecedented famine, and the Sino-Soviet split exacerbated China's economic situation. "Self reliance and arduous struggle" was now the motto for the nation to follow; professionals in literature and arts were encouraged to produce works supporting the Party's



■ *Courage and the Sword*, 1961

1 Tian Benxiang. *Biography of Cao Yu*. Beijing October Literature and Art Press, 1994, pp. 378-379.



■ *Consort of Peace*, 1979



■ *Consort of Peace*, 1979

policy. *Courage and the Sword* was written and produced against this background.

Based on the struggle between the kingdoms of Wu and Yue, around 500 BC, the five-act historical play focuses on the resolve and strategy evinced by the King of Yue. When held captive by the Wu, he sleeps on firewood and licks the bitter gall bladder to remind himself of his shame in losing his kingdom. (In Chinese belief the gall is directly associated with courage, and the Chinese title of the play is literally “Gall and Sword”.) Having gained his release, the King of Yue proceeds on a twenty-year crusade to unify his country and strengthen his army, eventually bringing victory to his land and restoring pride and independence to his people. The moral of this parable is clear: even a weak and conquered nation can stand up on its own through determined leadership, tireless effort and self-reliance.

Cao Yu’s unhappiness with *Courage and the Sword* was reflected in his speech at the 1962 National Symposium of Creative Work of Spoken Drama and Opera in Guangzhou:

I feel that we will not be able to write until we really know the people and their surroundings. We should also have real feelings about them before we pick up our pens.

#### ◆ *Consort of Peace* (1978)

The decade-long upheaval of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) saw creativity pushed aside. Cao Yu was publicly denounced and forced to work as a cleaner, mopping the



■ Cao Yu and Xia Yan (second from the right)

floors and toilets in the Beijing People's Art Theatre, an institution where he had been the founding president since 1952.

*Consort of Peace*, which originally had the eponymous title *Wang Zhaojun*, is the sole play written by Cao Yu after the Cultural Revolution. Wang Zhaojun was a lady-in-waiting in the Han court who was married off to a tribal prince to establish good relations between the Han and the Xiongnu tribe (circa 40 BC). Among the historical records, poetry, stories and plays about Wang Zhaojun, Cao Yu found her image in Han and Mongolian folk tales particularly fascinating. Her tomb, located in the Mongolian Autonomous Region, is called the "Green Tomb" because it is said to be covered by evergreen grass and shrubs even in the snows of winter. Superstition has it that infertile women will become pregnant if they spend a night at this tomb.

Written in poetic language, Cao Yu's five-act play presents the tale from an unorthodox angle. Under the playwright's pen, the heroine "wiping off the tears from her face, shows her own sparkling colour."<sup>1</sup> No longer a weeping girl unwilling to leave her home, Cao Yu's Wang Zhaojun is an independently-minded woman who volunteers to go because she wishes to help bring harmony between the two peoples and also because she sees an opportunity to gain a life of her own. She is determined not to follow the narrow existence of ladies-in-waiting whose entire lives are confined within

1 Cao Yu. *My Creative Work in Consort of Peace*. Sichuan People's publishing House, 1979, p. 193.



the palace walls without even a chance of meeting the emperor. Wang Zhaojun may be seen here as a new woman who celebrates the bright future after the dark years of the Cultural Revolution.

### More than a playwright and Cao Yu's legacy

China is proud of Cao Yu and his plays. He was appointed to numerous high official positions, and travelled widely to fulfil his duties, meeting state leaders and appearing on public occasions.

Cao Yu enjoyed running the Beijing People's Art Theatre as his day-to-day responsibility and giving talks to young playwrights as the Chairman of the All-China Dramatic Workers' Association. He also contributed in some degree to China's enthusiasm for Shakespeare in the late twentieth century by working with Shakespearean scholars and establishing the Chinese Shakespeare Association in 1986.

Although crowned with glory in public, Cao Yu criticized himself and remained deeply troubled by inner distress, suffering particularly due to his inability to write more plays in his later years. The legacy of much of his thinking has been left in unpublished writings.

2020 witnesses the 110<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Cao Yu's birth. A celebration and remembrance of his legacy in modern Chinese drama was held on 31 July at Poly Theatre in Beijing. Cao Yu's daughter, playwright and writer Wan Fang was interviewed on the stage. Scenes from several of Cao Yu's and Wan Fang's plays were also



■ Cao Yu and Li Yuru

performed. Due to the current situation of the COVID-19 pandemic, the event was streamed on over 20 media platforms with a small group of live audience with social distancing.

Indeed, through the work of Cao Yu, and fellow pioneers, an unfamiliar imported theatrical genre finally flowered into the Chinese spoken drama which today enjoys an enthusiastic following among Chinese theatre practitioners and younger audiences.

*LI RURU*

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# A Discussion on Ideology and Methodology of Cao Yu's Playwrighting

CHEN JUN

**ABSTRACT** Cao Yu stands out in Chinese theatre history as a world-class talent. Previous studies of the theatre master were biased towards writer theories, creation theories and performance theories, but not many about summarising his writing experiences. This paper will systematically summarise the ideology and methodology of Cao Yu's playwrighting from the perspective of scriptwriting to achieve the organic combination of the "external research" and "internal research" of literature. This is done to uphold the idea that the ideology and methodology of Cao Yu's playwrighting are a precious spiritual wealth given to posterity.

**KEY WORDS** Cao Yu, screenplay ideology methodology

Cao Yu was the most outstanding playwright in Chinese theatre history, successively creating five classic theatre works including *Thunderstorm*, *Sunrise*, *The Wilderness*, *Peking Man* and *The Family*. Because of Cao, foreign stage play styles matured and achieved long-term development in China. Even in international theatre circles, his work, reputation and influence occupy an important place. Cao was also a highly esteemed playwright among modern and contemporary Chinese writers. Liang Liewen praised *Thunderstorm* not long after its birth, "Thanks to it, I finally believe that China has 'modern plays' which can be performed on the most delicate stage in Paris."<sup>1</sup> Later on, *Sunrise* also received extensive attention and compliment. Professor H.E.Shadick, a famous British scholar, pointed out in *A Foreigner's Opinion*, "*Sunrise*

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1 Liang Liewen. A Bold Technique. *Takunpao*, January 1, 1937.

is the most powerful one among modern Chinese theatres I have ever watched. It stands without shame alongside Ibsen and Galsworthy's masterpieces of social theatre."<sup>1</sup> Other works of Cao also underwent the washing of years to gain immortal artistic vitality, shining brilliantly on the world stage.

For a long time, studies of Cao Yu have emerged and have become a prominent subject. Scholars proposed to construct a "Cao Yu School", but as Yu Shizhi pointed out, "Cao Yu's playwriting has been a hot issue in studies of Cao, but there is another significant aspect, the summary of Cao's writing experiences, that has not yet aroused wider attention in academia."<sup>2</sup> In general, studies of Cao Yu were biased towards the creation theory and writer theory, also expanding to the stage performance of Cao Yu's theatres in the new century.

However, there is a lack of research that summarizes Cao's creative views, experiences and methods from the perspective of playwriting. In fact, Cao Yu was also an experiential writer. From *Thunderstorm*-Preface, *Sunrise-Postscript and Playwriting Skills* during his National Theatre School period, to the great number of creation talks he published after the founding of the People's Republic of China, such as *A Discussion on Play Writing*, *Never Satisfied with a Tiny Sip*, *My Life and My Creation Path* and *Talking about Reading and Writing with Playwrights*, as well as his talks with young and middle-aged playwrights and his interviews with researchers and media, all reflect his inspirations and experiences to varying degrees, worth summarizing and promoting.

This paper will adopt the method of "knowing people to recognize the world" to break the boundary between "creation theories" and "writer theories", combining Cao Yu's writing skills and life experiences, and reflect on a series of Cao Yu's creation problems like "what to write", "how to write" and "why to write like this", so as to realize the theoretical attribution and summary of his creation ideas and methods.

## I. "Writing What I Feel Most Deeply"

When Cao Yu talked about the adaptation of *The Family*, he told Tamoto Sho, "Scripts are different from novels. Scripts have more restrictions. It is impossible to write all characters, events and scenes in the novel into the script for a three-hour performance. More importantly, I must write what I feel most deeply. My most

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1 H. E. Shadick. A Foreigner's Opinion. *Takunpao*, December 27, 1936.

2 Yu Shizhi. Pride of Our Theatre. *Chinese Theatre*, No. 5, 1997.



■ Cao Yu visiting the British Council, 1980

profound feeling about the novel of *The Family* is the resistance to feudal marriage and the pain unfortunate marriage brought to young people.”<sup>1</sup> Even in the adaptation, Cao Yu still attached great importance to his personal experience and wrote based on his own feelings and perceptions, besides his attention to differences of literary forms. This was his experience.

There were many similar expressions, “Writing does not only depend on a certain point of view, but also demands painstaking efforts. Writing is accumulated through years of life thoughts and feelings, rather than a temporary impulse nor absorption of certain knowledge.”<sup>2</sup> “Looking from the creation path, I shall say that write what you are most familiar with; write what you love.”<sup>3</sup> In the playwright Liang Bingkun’s book *Beside Cao Yu*, he specifically recalled Cao Yu’s edification to writers at Beijing People’s Art Theatre, in which he formulated three “do not write” principles for theatre writers, “Do not write insincerely”, “Do not write the unfamiliar life”, “Do not write familiar life without the truth you believe and understand”.<sup>4</sup>

One characteristic of Cao Yu’s works is that his works reflected personal life experiences. He wrote about the world he was familiar with. He said, “I was born in a bureaucratic family where I saw many high-ranking villains and hooligans. I have seen

1 Tian Benxiang. *Biography of Cao Yu*. Beijing October Literature and Art Press, 1994, p. 298.

2 Tian Benxiang, Liu Yijun( Ed). *The Complete Works of Cao Yu (Volume 5)*. Huashan Literature and Art Press, 1996, p.99.

3 Ibid. p.103.

4 Liang Bingkun. *Beside Cao Yu*. China Theatre Press, 1999, p.87.

people like characters in *Thunderstorm*, *Sunrise* and *Peking Man* a lot, and there was even a period that I live with them day and night.”<sup>1</sup>

Cao Yu preferred to mobilize his social observations and life experiences to write. In daily life, he also used pen and paper to record patiently at anytime and anywhere to hoard materials, so many of his characters had real-life prototypes. For example, Zeng Hao in *Peking Man* had the shadow of Cao's father Wan Dezun, and Zeng Wenqing shared many similarities with his elder brother Wan Jiaxiu. His father once knelt in front of his brother asking him not to smoke opium, which made his brother so embarrassed that he fled in haste. In the adaptation of *The Family*, the character Ruijue was created on the basis of Cao's second wife Fang Rui, and her husband Juexin's depression also contained Cao's perception on marriage as well as his emotional catharsis.

From Cao's self-narration, it is seen that some of his characters were developed from a specific prototype, while some were integrated and created from multiple prototypes. There are plenty of discussions in this regard, so I will not be repeating it in the paper. Due to Cao Yu's living environment, personality and growing experience, his sensibilities and feelings were also limited. Ma Junshan pointed it out, “The survival experience of Cao Yu was not broad but particular and profound. In his world, generally speaking, the old are more than the new, the family is more important than the society, and the women are better than the men.”<sup>2</sup> This generalization is extremely accurate. Cao Yu also tried to comprehend an unfamiliar life by experiencing it.

For instance, to write the third act of *Sunrise*, he visited a brothel to collect as many materials as possible. However, life experience and experiencing life are two distinct concepts. The former refers to the re-promotion and re-creation after long-term life accumulation and experiential understanding, while the latter is an acquaintance and investigation into a relatively unfamiliar life. The latter can hardly reach the breadth and depth of the former, and the former conveys realer sentiments than the latter.

Due to the autobiographical content, Cao Yu's works are constantly accompanied by strong intuitive and emotional factors. He mentioned in *Thunderstorm*-Preface, “Writing *Thunderstorm* was an urgent emotional need.” “The birth of *Thunderstorm* was a haunt of tempers and a fermentation of emotions.”<sup>3</sup> In *Sunrise*-Postscript, he also said, “Horrific nightmare-like people and things...turned into countless severe problems desperately assaulting me. These problems heated my emotions

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1 Cao Yu. Cao Yu Talking about *Thunderstorm*. *Renmin Xijiu*, No.3, 1979.

2 Ma Junshan. *Cao Yu: The Historical Progression and Convolution*. China Workers Press, 1992, p.127.

3 Cao Yu. *Thunderstorm*-Preface, *Research Retrospective of Cao Yu*. Wang Xingping, Liu Sijiu and Liu Wenbi (Ed.), The Straits Literature and Art Press, 1985, pp.16-17.



and strengthened my sense of grievance like a fever patient.”<sup>1</sup> There are numerous expressions of the similar point.

In addition to the devotion of true feelings, Cao Yu's early works also adhere to his sense of reality and cognition of life. For example, his maiden work *Thunderstorm* contains his reflections on destiny and fatalism. Other works like *Sunrise*, *The Wilderness* and *Peking Man* also demonstrate influences of Chinese and Western philosophical ideas such as Christian philosophy, Taoist philosophy and life philosophy. His adaptation of *The Family* adopts the relationship between the three characters, Juejin, Ruijue and Miss Mei, as the major clue of the script, while properly deleting the part of Juehui and his progressive movements with friends. The focus of the adaptation is no longer on the resistance of the new generation, but on the unfortunate love and marriage in the feudal society.

It is worth pointing out that the decline of Cao Yu's creation in later years was related to the fact that he stopped writing life and themes he was familiar with, but started to construct from an established theme. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, in order to write *Bright Skies*, Cao Yu investigated and delivered interviews in Peking Union Medical College Hospital to understand the problem of ideological transformation of intellectuals, but there was little effect other than estrangement.

Later he recalled, “Despite the struggle, I tried to adapt to the socialist realistic creation method. I forced myself to write, but now it seems to be quite passive. I cannot tell what it was like at that time.”<sup>2</sup> When talking about *Wang Zhaojun*, Cao Yu once said, “I am trying to consider in accordance with Chairman Mao's instruction of ‘conductive to national unity’ put forward in the ‘Six Standards’ when writing *Wang Zhaojun*. Premier Zhou's primary instruction is the national unity and cultural exchange. I am going to write a play in line with the history reality (but not fully in line, for the historical play is not only history but also a play which requires dramaticism). In the play, Wang Zhaojun is a smiling but not crying Wang Zhaojun, a Wang Zhaojun who promotes national unity and a Wang Zhaojun who may be approved by Premier Zhou.”<sup>3</sup>

Obviously, the “theme first” approach violated his early creation principles and deviated from his creation personality, so the failure was inevitable. Later Cao Yu also reflected on it, “Write stories you see. Write characters you see. Those plays not deliberated in the author's spiritual world nor moved in the emotional world may be impressive for a while but never forever. I do not agree with such a way of writing. I suppose that our

1 Cao Yu. *Sunrise-Postscript, Research Retrospective of Cao Yu*. Wang Xingping, Liu Sijiu and Liu Wenbi (Ed.), The Straits Literature and Art Press, 1985, p.31.

2 Tian Benxiang. *Biography of Cao Yu*. Beijing October Literature and Art Press, p.379.

3 Cao Yu. One the Writing of the Play *Wang Zhaojun*, *Renmin Xijiu*. No. 12, 1978.



■ *Thunderstorm*, 1935



■ *Thunderstorme*, 2008

literary arts have been too particular about ‘use’ for a long period. Why cannot we create cosmopolitan works? This is a thought-provoking question.”<sup>1</sup>

## II. “Extracting Others”, “Gold Threads” and “Weaving Them into ‘Clothes’”

After the publication of *Thunderstorm*, some believed that “(Cao Yu) was an adherent of Ibsen, or conjectured that parts of the play inherited the inspiration of *Hippolytus* by Euripides or *Phèdre* by Racine.”<sup>2</sup> Cao Yu responded in *Thunderstorm*-Preface, “I am myself, a tiny self...In the past years I read several plays and acted several times, but despite all the strength for recalling, I failed to find a point of intentional imitation. Perhaps at the bottom of the so-called ‘subconsciousness’, I deceived myself: I am an ungrateful slave, drawing out gold threads from my master’s house to weave them into my ugly clothes, while denying that the faded (due to in my hand) threads belong to the master”<sup>3</sup>.

This response indicated that Cao Yu, as a master of modern theatres, did not deny

1 Liang Bingkun. *Beside Cao Yu*. China Theatre Press, p.26.

2 Cao Yu. *Thunderstorm*-Preface, *Research Retrospective of Cao Yu*. Wang Xingping, Liu Sijiu and Liu Wenbi (Ed.), The Straits Literature and Art Press, 1985, p.14.

3 *Ibid.* P.14.

that he absorbed all kinds of art resources, but he did not simply accept and imitate others indiscriminately during the process, but highlighted the “integration” quality which showed his spirit, that is, to weave his own “clothes” from others’ “gold threads”.<sup>1</sup> Dr. Liu Shaoming of Hong Kong once quoted Mr. Lin Yiliang’s view in *A Discussion of Cao Yu*, suggesting that Cao Yu does not deserve much research, because his works are too shallow to become a school. He compared Cao Yu with Marlowe of Britain, Goethe of Germany, Ibsen of Norway and O’Neill of the US, affirming the influence of foreign masters and pointed out Cao Yu’s “failure”. I disagree with Liu’s view, for although Cao Yu imitated or drew experiences from works of these theatre masters, he already formed his unique creation through learning and absorbing from strengths of multiple sources. In my view, Cao Yu was a writer with the quality of integration. In a sense, integration is innovation.

Cao Yu once said, “The process of learning the strength of foreigners is unconscious and digested. Instead of copying and imitating, you are supposed to blend in and incorporate, and then transform it into a unique Chinese style and a unique writer’s style. In short, it leads to new creation.”<sup>2</sup> Cao Yu never indiscriminately accepted foreign things but had his own digestion, integration and recreation. For instance, he learnt from Xiqu in the creation. He said, “If I, as well as people like Tian Han, Xia Yan and Wu Zuguang, had no profound accomplishments in the Chinese traditional culture or Xiqu, I would not be able to digest the Western stage play.”<sup>3</sup> In the meantime, he wrote about Chinese subjects and Chinese people, so he paid great attention to the depiction of national characters and the expression of national emotions, highlighting the national creation characteristics. He said, “In style, *Peking Man* is influenced by Chekhov... However, *Peking Man* is distinct from Chekhov’s theatres, because *Peking Man* writes about thoughts and feelings of Chinese people after all. You can compare the characters in *Peking Man* and *Three Sisters*. Their pain, sorrow, expectation and hope are different from each other! The expression modes of characters’ emotions are also differentiated.”<sup>4</sup>

The diversification of foreign influences on Cao Yu’s creation attributes to his extensive reading. In his childhood, he carefully read the Jingju in *Theatre Examination*, learning the ability of writing characters and engaging stories. During his study at Tianjin Nankai High School and then the Department of Western Literature at Tsinghua University, he

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1 Taking *Thunderstorm* as an example, textual research shows that it draws on multiple world famous theatres such as Aeschylus’s *Oedipus the King*, Ibsen’s *Ghosts* and *A Doll’s House*, and O’Neill’s *Beyond the Horizon* and *Desire Under the Elms*, but it is a creative transformation by Cao Yu rather than a reprint of these plays.

2 Cao Yu. Finding Truths by Oneself, *Renmin Xiju*. No.6, 1981.

3 Tian Benxiang. The Significance of Cao Yu, *Drama Literature*. No.6, 1997.

4 Tian Benxiang. Conversation record between Cao Yu and Tian Benxiang on May 26, 1982, *Biography of Cao Yu*. Beijing October Literature and Art Press, 1988, p.280.

thirsted for reading, with tastes ranging from classical to modern, from ancient Greek tragedy and Shakespeare's plays to Ibsen's social theatre and Chekhov's realistic theatre, and to avant-garde theatres of symbolism and expressionism (like O'Neill's works).

This enabled him to communicate with predecessors in his creation, widening his horizons, promoting his starting point, and activating his thoughts. Cao Yu said, "Learn techniques from prominent Chinese and foreign scripts. To read a prominent script, we should read it repeatedly where it attracts us most. Study why it attracts us. Is it the idea and emotion? Is it the character? Is it the structure? Is it the writing style? Read it over and over again to finally see the trick."<sup>1</sup> Cao Yu's fondness for reading was famous in the circle. Those who contacted and communicated with Cao Yu were often impressed by his ardent love for reading. His student Yezi called him a library playwright, for he read a lot and had an especially strong memory. At Beijing People's Art Theatre, he was a famous walking dictionary. When it comes to unusual theatres, he always offered you a satisfactory answer. Mei Duo recalled in *The Immortality of Art Life*, "He grasped every second to read, never wasting time even when he was walking... It can be said that there are few people like Cao Yu who read world theatre masterpieces so extensively, and also few like him who opened heart to accept the life creation of those artists to melt into his life, and drew strength from it."<sup>2</sup>

Besides "extensive" and "intensive", another feature of Cao Yu's reading is "miscellaneous". In addition to theatres, he also read novels, not only the classical ones like *A Dream in Red Mansions*, but also works of modern writers such as Lu Xun, Mao Dun and Yu Dafu. He also read various books about ideology. "He read Buddhist and Taoist texts as well as the Bible, studied Plato, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer and Lincoln, and researched about Sun Yat-sen's works and propositions."<sup>3</sup> When he was studying at Tsinghua University, he had acquaintances with Bach's religious music. After reading *Tolstoy's Resurrection*, his interest in the ceremony of the Great Mass was aroused; "The artistic accomplishment should be broad. Besides reading, the appreciation ability of art should be trained in many ways and one should absorb nutrition from multiple aspects. Narrow interests are not conducive to art creation."<sup>4</sup> It is due to Cao Yu's incorporation and multi-faceted extraction of "gold threads" that his "clothes" are so extraordinary and brilliant.

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1 Tian Benxiang, Liu Yijun(Ed). *The Complete Works of Cao Yu* (Volume 5). Huashan Literature and Art Press, p.541.

2 Mei Duo. *The Immortality of Art Life, Cao Yu's Comments on Seventy Years*. Liu Yong and Li Chunyu(Ed), Culture and Art Publishing House, 2007, p.56.

3 Wang Xingping, Liu Sijiu and Liu Wenbi (Ed.). *A Brief Biography of Cao Yu, Research Retrospective of Cao Yu*. The Straits Literature and Art Press, 1985, p.5.

4 Cao Yu. *Memories of Childhood, Cao Yu's Comments on Seventy Years*. Liu Yong and Li Chunyu (Ed.), Culture and Art Publishing House, 2007, p.8.

### III. “Differentiating One Play from One Another”

As mentioned earlier, Cao Yu’s works have been questioned for drawing on a variety of art resources, which seems excessively imitative but inadequately innovative. This is actually a huge misunderstanding of Cao Yu and his works. Cao was an ambitious playwright, and the reason why he had such a few creations in later years was due to his high self-expectations. He did not want to repeat himself, not to mention other people. During his old age, there were always works of foreign theatre masters in his sickbed. Deep down his heart he craved to become a world-famous playwright, anxious and distressed for failing to write first-class theatre works. As early as in *Thunderstorm* ·Preface, he described his personality like this, “I never know how to express myself. I am constantly melancholy and obscure; Although I show pleasure in front of people, I continually distress myself when alone like those whose spirit refuses to solidify.”<sup>1</sup>

The spiritual refusal to solidification was the motivation for Cao Yu to pursue innovation in writing. His well-known work *Thunderstorm* planned big, legitimately setting up so many complicated character relationships and dramatic conflicts in a limited time and space. Clever interludes and coordination enabled the audience not to notice flaws and loopholes, which required high writing techniques. When talking about the writing conception of *Thunderstorm*, Cao Yu said, “The symphony was endlessly ringing in my ears due to unknown reasons. Its structure of layers unfolded, overlapped, spiraled and constantly sublimated, which seemed to have an inexplicable attraction for me; the inescapable fate implied in ancient Greek tragedies also entangled me. The reason might be that at that time I assumed the society to be a cruel well, a dark pit, a net that no one could escape from. There was no way out for humans. Nobody could breakaway from tragic destiny. These are the elements of *Thunderstorm*’s structure, which is so vast that no one can escape from it! The structure of a play is not a modality but a sense of art, a playwright’s unique sense of life and the society.”<sup>2</sup>

It is no wonder that Arthur Miller, a famous American playwright and Nobel Prize winner in literature, commented, “The structure of *Thunderstorm* has a bold spirit. It is one of the greatest dramatic structures I have ever seen.”<sup>3</sup> However, when Cao was writing *Sunrise*, he found *Thunderstorm* to be “too much like a play”, so he began to

1 Cao Yu. *Thunderstorm*·Preface, *Research Retrospective of Cao Yu*. Wang Xingping, Liu Sijiu and Liu Wenbi (Ed.), The Straits Literature and Art Press, 1985, p.14.

2 Tian Benxiang. Myths and Rituals: Prototype Interpretation of Theatres-Preface. Hu Zhiyi. *Myths and Rituals: Prototype Interpretation of Theatres*. Academia Press, 2001, p.4.

3 Tian Benxiang. *Biography of Cao Yu*. Beijing October Literature and Art Press, p.451.

“explore a new path”, “clarifying an idea with fragments of life.”<sup>1</sup> In *Sunrise*, he turned from a family tragedy to a social tragedy, strongly criticising the money society in which “the weak is exploited to strengthen the strong”. The writing of *The Wilderness* had another method. Cao expanded his horizon to the vast countryside, expressing a story of peasants’ revenge and the resulting prison of mind. He intentionally broke through the mode of realism in his creation method, absorbed the expressionist artistic techniques and advanced deeper into the soul. He said, “After *Sunrise*, I realised that I have no way but create something new. I have the idea that a play ought to be distinct from one another. I should not repeat the past characters, backgrounds and atmosphere.”<sup>2</sup>

After *The Wilderness*, *Peking Man* also had differences and innovations in the writing method, structure and characters. It began to reflect on the impact of cultures on human beings. Not only did it reveal the decadency of the feudal culture, but it also excavated the real gold and new blood of traditional cultures. Even for *The Family* adapted from Ba Jin’s novel, he was not loyal to the original, but recreated the story based on his feelings, views and methods, endowing it with independent aesthetic value. The critic Liu Nianqu pointed out, “The script was adapted from a novel but it was not just transformed in forms to become suitable for the stage. Obviously, Cao Yu injected his life, thoughts and emotions into this uneasy work, thus, it is not too much to regard it as a new play.”<sup>3</sup>

Even for the criticised later works, Cao Yu never stopped breaking through and surpassing himself. Despite its politicization and conceptualization, *Bright Skies* demonstrated new themes, new characters and new methods. However, due to “seventeen years” of special spiritual climate, the writer had not fully grasped and understood these new creations yet. Other plays like, *Courage and the Sword* and *Wang Zhaojun*, are both historical theatres as well as new extension of Cao Yu’s creation field. The characterization of Wu Zixu, Gou Jian and Sun Meiren are vivid and impressive. These are new faces in Cao Yu’s character gallery. From the two plays, I can see Cao Yu’s new pursuit of poetic style, even though both possess the shortage of utilitarianism.

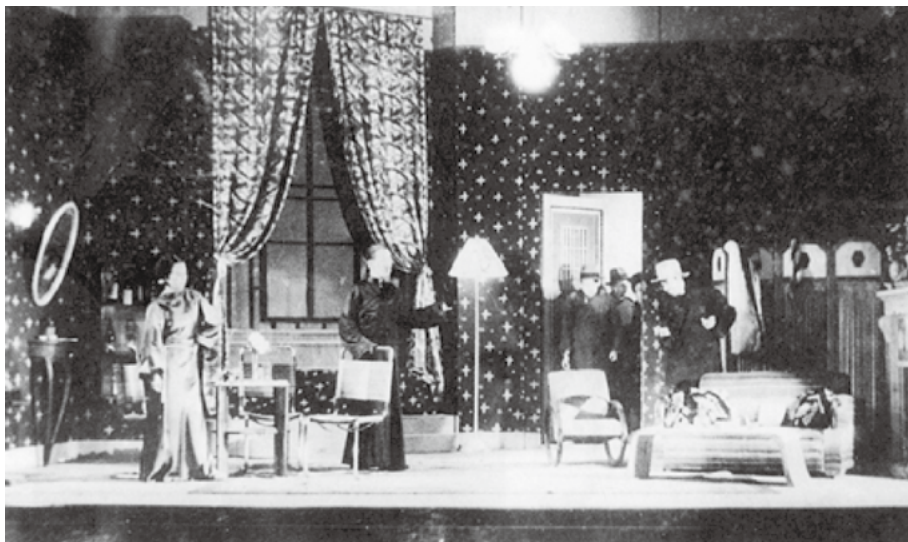
In the end, I would like to point out that there is consistency in Cao Yu’s creation innovation, that is, centring on characters, and always writing characters as if they are

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1 Cao Yu. *Sunrise-Postscript, Research Retrospective of Cao Yu*. Wang Xingping, Liu Sijiu and Liu Wenbi (Ed.), The Straits Literature and Art Press, 1985, p.31.

2 Cao Yu. *The Road to The Wilderness, Cao Yu’s Comments on Seventy Years*. Liu Yong and Li Chunyu(Ed.), Culture and Art Publishing House, 2007, p.26.

3 Liu Nianqu. Life is to be Conquered by oneself——After Cao Yu’s New Play *The Family*, *Theatre Daily*. No.3, 1943.



■ *Sunrise*, 1937

real humans. For many times he said, “As a theatre creator, I have concentrated on characters for many years. I believe that writing plays is mainly about writing ‘people’; my mind is devoted to portraying characters.”<sup>1</sup>

#### IV. “Getting Familiar with the Stage and Audience”

Cao Yu was called a theatre genius by many scholars. *Thunderstorm*, as his first successful and representative work, pulled off a great coup. It seems unimaginable, but this success is in fact related to the early-stage preparation of Cao Yu. He mentioned in *Before “Thunderstorm”*, “I am no genius. A genius is a diligent and patient person who cudgels his brain for ideas and lives a struggle life with inexhaustible energy. I wrote *Thunderstorm* after more than ten years of accumulations of thoughts and life, as well as eight years of apprenticeship.”<sup>2</sup> The eight-year apprenticeship refers to the eight-year stage performance practice of Cao Yu from 1925 to 1933. Cao Yu acquainted with theatres at an early age. He watched

1 Cao Yu. Watching the Play *Dan Xin Pu*, *Guangming Daily*. April 10, 1978.

2 Cao Yu. *Before Thunderstorm*, *Theatrical Circle*. No.1, 1981.





■ *Peking Man*, 1942

theatre with his stepmother in childhood, and Tianjin Nankai High School, where he studied, was the cradle of modern Chinese theatre movements. The school had excellent artistic atmosphere, experienced instructors, a formal theatre association and abundant performing practices.

During the period, Cao Yu was the backbone performer and activist of Nankai New Theatre Troupe, performing in multiple largely-reverberated and highly-praised plays such as the female tenant in Ding Xilin's *Oppression*, Nora in Ibsen's *Nora (A Doll's House)*, and main characters in other plays like *The Headstrong Husband*, *New Village Head* and *Mad Money*. Cao's stage practice had a dramatic influence on his theatre creation. He said, "Nankai New Theatre Troupe is my teacher, ... It familiarised me with the stage, the audience and the method of writing plays to attract the audience. Different from novels and films, the theatre has its own internal principle. The stage practice is the crucial way to master this principle. Therefore, to write a play, one cannot only rely on watching scripts but also on acting the script. One must realise how to behave on the stage when writing."<sup>1</sup> Shortly after the release of *Thunderstorm*, the famous theatre critic Liu Xiwei pointed out sharply in one of his comments, "Cao Yu's original name is Wan Jiabao, so *Thunderstorm* is a production by an INSIDER. It is his first work, but it immediately catches the attention of the general public. *Thunderstorm* has made a great clamour."<sup>2</sup>

Cao Yu's early "performing" practice provided prominent support for his later "writing". He understood the stage and had an active thinking in creating scenes,

1 Tian Benxiang. *Biography of Cao Yu*. Beijing October Literature and Art Press, p.88.

2 Liu Xiwei. *Thunderstorm*—Work by Cao Yu, *Research Retrospective of Cao Yu*. Wang Xingping, Liu Sijiu and Liu Wenbi (Ed.), The Straits Literature and Art Press, 1985, p.538.

which endowed his creation with a rich and delicate audio-visual experience. His play writing can be read and also performed, truly achieving the double beauty of literature and stage. When Tamoto Sho interviewed Cao Yu, he expressed that Cao had a successful theatre language, concise and charming; it was humorous, profound and subtle, which was impossible for the ordinary to reach. Cao Yu answered, “My theatre language may be related to acting. ...The practice of this language is not a matter of one or two days, but is linked with the sense of stage and audience. The expression of each line needs to be considered based on how to arouse the audience and how to generate the next move.”<sup>1</sup>

If “the life of the script lies in the performance”<sup>2</sup>, then the life of the stage/theatre lies in the audience. Cao Yu wrote with a strong sense of the audience, “A person who works with theatres, whether a performer, a director or a playwright, needs the audience, especially the common audience. Only the audience is the life of theatres.”<sup>3</sup> Due to the consideration of the audience’s aesthetic psychology and favourable effects, Cao Yu’s theatres appeal to both refined and popular taste, possessing a significant ornamental value.

Taking *Thunderstorm* as an example, although it has a far-reaching conception and philosophical thinking about human destiny and survival dilemma, the story is demotic with class struggle, a love triangle, father-son opposition, sibling feuds, incest, suicide, resentment and the wrath of heaven. There are complicated interpersonal relationships and dramatic plot twists. Wang Meng pointed out *The Forever “Thunderstorm”*, “Thunderstorm is a popular classic as well as a classical popularity.”<sup>4</sup>

By the time Cao wrote *Sunrise*, he had not been satisfied with *Thunderstorm* being “too much like a play”. He tried to learn from Chekhov’s theatre, because in Chekhov’s plays, “there is no abrupt interlude but only living people with souls walking in and out. The structure is plain with no thrilling scenes nor ups and downs of plots and characters, but it grabbed my soul tightly.”<sup>5</sup> However, after writing a few drafts, he burnt them up, for he realised, “Even if I complete it and barely obtained a bit of charm, the question is whether our current audience would like to watch it or not.

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1 Tian Benxiang, Liu Yijun. *The Soul of Depression*. Jiangsu Education Publishing House, 2001, p.102.

2 Cao Yu. Cao Yu Talking about *Thunderstorm*, *Research Retrospective of Cao Yu*. Wang Xingping, Liu Sijiu and Liu Wenbi (Ed.), The Straits Literature and Art Press, 1985, p.188.

3 Cao Yu. *Sunrise*-Postscript, *Research Retrospective of Cao Yu*. Wang Xingping, Liu Sijiu and Liu Wenbi (Ed.), The Straits Literature and Art Press, 1985, pp.34-36.

4 Wang Meng. *The Forever Thunderstorm, Cao Yu’s Comments on Seventy Years*. Liu Yong and Li Chunyu(Ed.), Culture and Art Publishing House, 2007, p.77.

5 Cao Yu, *Sunrise*-Postscript, *Research Retrospective of Cao Yu*. Wang Xingping, Liu Sijiu and Liu Wenbi (Ed.), The Straits Literature and Art Press, 1985, p.33.

They want stories, interludes and intense scenes.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, considering the acceptance of audience, *Sunrise* added the storyline to the plot structure and interlaced comic fragments.

Similarly, in the first act of Cao Yu’s adaptation of *The Family*, after the long soliloquy of Juexin and Ruijue during the wedding night, three kids suddenly got out from under the bed to tease the newlyweds, which made the audience laugh a lot. This arrangement was because Cao Yu was expert at fathoming the audience’s psychology and laying emphasis on the coordination of cold and warm scenes, which well-played the role of buffoonery. Liang Bingkun recalled in *Beside Cao Yu*, “I do not know how many times when plays of Cao Yu and others were performed, I saw Cao Yu, either in the auditorium, beside the curtain, or under the side light, watching the play alone with full attention, and also watching the audience’s reaction with full attention. He experienced the story with the audience.”<sup>2</sup> Cao Yu said, “Learn skills from the audience. The audience is alive, so we should study why they cry at this point, why they laugh at that point, and why they applaud at this point but make no noise at another point.”<sup>3</sup> In summary, Cao Yu thought about the audience when writing plays, attaching importance to studying their preference and psychology. This is one of the reasons why his theatres are so popular with the audience.

It is hoped this article goes someway to comprehensively and objectively summarised the ideology and methodology of Cao Yu’s playwrighting from four aspects. Cao Yu devoted all his life to theatre and he is one of the few versatile talents in China who mastered playwrighting, directing and acting. He attached great importance to the ontological characteristics and inherent law of theatres. His ideas and methods of playwrighting were gradually formed by learning from Chinese and Western theatre art experiences and integrating his own creation comprehensions, which are still valuable for references. This is the precious spiritual wealth he gave to future generations.

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1 Ibid. p. 33.

2 Liang Bingkun. *Beside Cao Yu*. China Theatre Press, p.89.

3 Ibid. p.89.

# The 40-Year Global Spread of Cao Yu's Classics during Reform and Opening-up Era

CAO SHUJUN

**ABSTRACT** In 2018, China embraced the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary since enforcing its Reform and Opening-up Policy, which stirred a dramatic economic and political revolution, leading Chinese culture to leap to a new stage. As a symbol of the everlasting life of art, plays written by the most prestigious playwright, Cao Yu, are widely performed in China, and Cao's five classics encountered unprecedented popularity worldwide. These performances not only bridge continents to bring people closer, but also serve as a brand, affirming Chinese cultural confidence.

**KEYWORDS** Cao Yu, Five classics, Vitality of art, Cultural confidence

Performance rejuvenates plays. Thus, the vitality of Cao's plays heavily relies on its long lasting life on stage. Having reformed and opened up for 40 years, China witnesses the spread of Cao's works at home and abroad. His five classics, namely *Thunderstorm*, *Sunrise*, *The Wilderness*, *Peking Man*, and *The Family* (an adaption of Ba Jin's novel), are booming globally. With *Thunderstorm*'s oversea debut in 1935, Cao's plays' performance experienced an evolution, from the introductory period (1935-1949) to the development period (1950-1979) and, finally, to the global extension period (1978-2018).

Most recently, the performances of Cao's five classics cover five continents with increasing quality and quantity, which fuels the study and translation of Cao's classics. This extends his work beyond its initial era, and furthers the artistry of his creations.

Based on existing material, this essay aims to explain the 40-year global spread and development of Cao's plays, especially the five classics, during the Reform and

Opening-up era, trying to make a contribution to the promotion of Cao Yu Studies.

## I

The performances of Cao's plays continuously increasing in Asia and Europe is the first feature in the latest period.

In Asia, *Thunderstorm* has always been performed in Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Singapore.

Saburo Kageyama, a Japanese scholar, stated the reason why he re-translated *Thunderstorm* into Japanese and published it through the Future House in 1953 was that the only Japanese book he owned was tore, due to the overuse by the independent troupes and student associations during those years. The new era of Reform and Opening-up witnessed the frequent reappearance of *Thunderstorm* in the Japanese stage, for instance, in May 1984, its Chinese version performed at Kansai University and received a warm reception.

Meanwhile, in September 1985, Shanghai People's Art Troupe was invited to conduct a performing tour in Tokyo, Nagoya, Osaka, Yokohama, etc., where it was embraced with great popularity. Being directed by Zuo Lin and starring Wei Qiming, Chen Qi, Zhang Xiaoming, Song Yining, Wang Jingdi, etc., Cao's adaption of *The Family* was played 78 times in total while delivering its Japanese version.

In December 1945, *Thunderstorm*, which exceeds four hours, premiered in Vietnam and thrived through the Reform and Opening-up period. In 1991, *Thunderstorm* was performed in Haiphong City and Ho Chi Minh city, with the latter performance being broadcasted via TV nationally. In July 2004, *Thunderstorm* reappeared in Ho Chi Minh city channel and showed up in various stages in the following years.

*Thunderstorm* is also a time-treasured play in Korea with its premiere in July 1946 and a record 70 consecutive shows. In 1988, *Thunderstorm*, directed by Li Hailang, was launched in Seoul, stirring the audiences' passion. In 1995, *Thunderstorm* was staged by Chinese majored students of Gyeongsang National University and was performed annually so as to enhance their proficiency in Chinese.

Apart from the above, Cao's plays fulfilled themselves in Malaysia and the Philippines. In 1975, Arts Theatre of Singapore held *Thunderstorm*, and several years later, Victoria Theatre presented this play conducted by the Singapore I-Lien Drama Society. In 1988, A prestigious director, Xia Chun, who served in Beijing People's Art Theatre was invited to supervise *Thunderstorm* in person, to reveal the breath-taking linguistic

charm and dramatic tense to the Singapore audiences.

While *Thunderstorm* was being staged in Malaysia in February 1983, its director commented that "*Thunderstorm's* art achievement outranks that of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*."

In 1988, the Filipino version of *Peking Man*, conducted by Ding Ning, a director from Liaoning People's Art Troupe, turned out to be a grand success there, contributing to upgrading the local artists' academic tastes.

The Philippine Art Centre specifically invited Vélez, a distinguished film actress, to act as Si Yi in *Peking Man*. This star who won the National Best Actress Award in 1985 realized the importance of art through her play in *Peking Man*, declaring that: "I shall sacrifice myself for the sake of art."<sup>1</sup>

As to its spread in Europe, *Thunderstorm* was mostly performed in the Soviet Union in the 1950s. From November to December 1957, nine theatres contacted Chinese theatre associations and the Beijing People's Art Theatre, yearning for *Thunderstorm*. From the 1950s to 1960s, the Chinese play most performed in Soviet Union theatres was Cao's *Thunderstorm*. To distinguish this play from Ostrovsky's famous play, which shared the same title, Cao's *Thunderstorm* was acknowledged as *Lightning Storm*, *Tempest*, *Typhoon*. With this in mind, we can estimate that the play has been staged more than 2000 times in the former Soviet Union.

Cao's play returned to the Russian stage in Reform and Opening-up period. In 1983, *Thunderstorm* was brought back to the Russian audiences in Moscow, enjoying their passionate feedback.

In December 1989, *Thunderstorm*, presented by Nottara Theatre, was regarded as unique in Romania. The open-minded young director Alexandru Dabizas adopted a bold advent design to amaze his audiences. Firstly, he selected a peculiar opening. Two shadowy figures fled suddenly in the "haunted" dining room with the curtain drawing up. Then, while the gleaming lights dispel the darkness, audiences were bewitched by the plot after seeing the incredibly authentic oriental dining room. Secondly, he struck upon a novel set design, helping *Thunderstorm* forge its distinctive quality, which charmed the audience and was highly praised by papers and radio programs. Thanks to those creative qualities, *Thunderstorm* blessed theatre with extreme high attendance in its dozens of shows.

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1 Chen Suijiu, Shi Mingyi. On the Performance of Peking People, *World Journal*. Oct. 27, 1988.

## II

Another feature of the spread of Cao's plays is its global influence, which covered five continents as they were put on the stages of Australia and Africa.

In this period, Cao's plays went beyond Asia, Europe, and South America, which hosted them during the first two periods, pioneering the new areas of Australia and Africa.

In November 1988, an Australian Chinese, Mis. Jiang Jingzhi founded the first Australian Chinese drama club for amateurs, together with Li Jiayao, a Shanghai actor who was visiting relatives there. *Thunderstorm* was the first play promoted by the club. This club had Li Jiayao deliver seven lectures for the sake of this play, and consulted with Gu Yongfei, the leading actress of the film version *Thunderstorm* directed by Sun Daolin.

*Thunderstorm* reaped a lot of interest, drawing the attention of the overseas Chinese, the press, and the academic arena. They issued an abundance of articles, speaking highly of the premiere of Cao's play in Australia. Thanks to this successful performance, the club staged a historical play *The Legend of Emperor Yue* (Edited by Bai Ye) and *Love and Bruises* (edited directed and acted by Jiang Jingzhi) to following, galvanizing the local Australian drama scene.

In this period, Cao's play made a splash in Egypt. During the 1980s and the 1990s, there were more than two dozen of postgraduate students who admired Cao and appreciated his masterpieces, *Thunderstorm*, *Sunrise*, and regarded Cao as the most beloved playwright in the Chinese Department at Ain Shams University, Cairo. Nasheed, an Egyptian student, played Fanyi, and her acting was "so successful, that she gained the first prize of acting in the cultural week", thus, she was honoured as "Egyptian Fanyi." The performance stimulated Egyptian students' passion for researching and translating Cao's plays. Iman entitled her dissertation as "The Artistic Language Style of Cao's Play", and another Ph.D. candidate Aziz translated Sunrise into Arabic and had it issued by a Kuwaiti publisher.

## III

The erasure of the bias towards Cao's plays in American artistic circles and spread the influence of his plays in the western world is another feature of this period.

The world stage witnessed more of Cao's plays, such as *Peking Man*, and *The Family* (an adaption of Ba Jin's novel), apart from the previous trilogy, drawing western



attention. The prestigious actor and director, Ying Ruocheng, concluded that due to some ideological differences, for a pretty long time, "the west lost trace of our artistic achievement after May-Fourth-Movement when it comes to our theatre activities."<sup>1</sup> Hence, their acknowledgment of Cao's works was worse. As it is illustrated in the preface of an English monograph entitled *Cao Yu*<sup>2</sup>, the author Liu Shaoming has followed Lin Yiliang, a Chinese American scholar's point of view, deeming that "Cao's works are too shallow to merge into the mainstream". While admitting "Cao is the most popular playwright with Chinese readers and audiences," Liu Shaoming concluded that Cao's play was "flashy" and "a total failure"<sup>3</sup>. This book represented the western sinologists comment on Cao before the 1970s, which was ferociously retorted by some scholars who studied Cao Yu, saying that that derogation "didn't match Cao Yu's creative thoughts and situation...they were unjust and subjective, leading us astray in decoding the complex causes contributed to Cao Yu's success."<sup>4</sup>

Besides, some scholars from Taiwan also resented to those biases convinced that Cao Yu made an indelible contribution to Chinese theatre, and they were irritated by "those ungrateful oversea 'playwriters' who criticized Cao."<sup>5</sup>

The devoted and professional performances helped those in the West, including Americans, to appreciate with positive points of view Cao's plays. New York had presented *Peking Man* with tremendous success in March 1980, when Cao was visiting America, and it echoed to the one staged in April 1953.

On March 25<sup>th</sup>, 1980, *Peking Man* was staged in New York by Columbia University, with Kent Paul as its director, Leslie as its translator, and Quentin as the Scenic designer. The dining room of the Zen represented on the stage was an aesthetic sense of traditional style, except the opium smoker, which was not a realistic one. Most of the actors were Asians: Zeng Ting was played by a Japanese actor, and Zeng Wencai by a Japanese American, Rui Zhen was played by a Korean, and Su Fang, Si Yi, Jiang Tai, Nanny Chen were casted with Chinese Americans. Jiang Tai was vividly presented, and some lines about the names of Peking restaurants were translated freely and aroused greatly the interest of the audience.

Cao was thrilled to see this play in America. It earned not only American audiences' favour but also that of his fellow playwrights. Author Miller accompanied Cao for the play, and regarded it as a "breathtaking and enchanting tragedy". Even Xia Zhiqing, an

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1 Ying Ruocheng. On *The Family's Rehearsal in America*, *Beijing Evening News*. 3rd, Apr. 1984.

2 Liu Shaoming. *On Cao Yu*. Hongkong Art Publishing House, 1970. The other version published by Hongkong Art Publishing House was renamed as *On Cao Yu*.

3 Liu Shaoming. *On Cao Yu*. Hongkong Art Publishing House, 1970.

4 Cao Shujun. *Cao Yu: Embracing the World*. Tiandi Press. p.1.

5 Ye Long. The Mr. Jia Yidi I Know, *Alumni of Theatre Collage in Taiwan*. Dec. 1990.

American scholar who was extremely critical on Cao's play, admitted that the director and scene designer were "high-levelled, especially when it comes to the exquisite dining room. Audiences were bewitched as the first scene unveiled".<sup>1</sup> Mao Junhui, who played Jiang Tai, also presented his outstanding performance which received a standing ovation at the end of the show and Cao stepped on the stage to extend his congratulations to the actors and thanked the audience. He was so excited, he said, "Bravo! Everyone, including the actors, director, scene designer, was devoted to the play with his passion and sincerity. This performance embodies the Sino-US friendship and is a fruit of our cultural communication".

In March 1980, being invited by the US-China Art Exchange Centre of Columbia University and US-China Exchange Community, Cao conducted a lecture tour in America, accompanied by Ying Ruocheng. In August 1982, the University of Missouri had the famous actor and director Ying Ruocheng to be their guest Professor. During that time, he translated Cao's adaption of Bajin's *The Family* into English, and directed it as a training play for the theatre students. From October 28<sup>th</sup> to 31<sup>th</sup> 1982, Halen Theatre of Kansas held this play performed by students of the University of Missouri. A lot of audiences shed tears for the misfortune of Rui Jue, Ming Feng, Jue Xin, and Jue Hui. The American critics commented that: "*The Family* enlightened American of the Chinese society in the 1920s, which is a key to decoding the following grand revolution of China", it was one of the "stage masterpiece" of University of Missouri.<sup>2</sup>

## IV

The worldwide spreading of Cao's oeuvre in this period was also marked by its various adaptations such as local xiqu, western opera, film, and TV series, which helped a lot to extend the influence of these plays.

In the late 1990s, a Chuanju adaption of *Jinzi* (edited by Long Xueyi, art directed by Li Zibai and directed by Hu Mingke) promoted by Chongqing Chuanju theatre turned out to be a grand success. "this unique performance took full advantage of its artistic character, becoming a satisfying attempt to interpret Cao's play through Chuanju"<sup>3</sup>.

In accordance with the artistic feature of Chuanju and the requirement of art novation,

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1 Xia Zhiqing. Documentary on Cao Yu' s Visit in Columbia University, *Literary Collection of Xia Zhiqing*. p. 113.

2 Ying Ruocheng. On *The Family's* Rehearsal in America, *Beijing Evening News*. 3rd, Apr. 1984.

3 Cao Shujun. A Beautiful Wild Rose—on Chuanju version of *Jinzi*, *Sichuan Theatre*, No. 5, 1999.



■ *The Wilderness*, 2005

the playwright switched the protagonist from Qiu Hu to Jinzi, enriching its social content and reflecting by a condensed revealing of Jinzi's fate. The storylines of Jinzi and Qiu Hu intertwined and echoed with each other, making Qiu's revenge more exciting and attractive.

The playwright combined Cao's thematic which he knew well, with the Chuanju form with which he was familiar, making a dramatic adaption with a lot of omission and amplification. Thanks to his effort, this Chuanju version not only retained the essential plot of the original work but also carried the Xiqu's features forward.

The life of plays relies on the stage. In the recreated *Jinzi*, Shen Tiemei acted as the protagonist Jinzi, transferring a literature image to an animated stage character, which endowed the performance with splendid glamour.

*Jinzi's* success brought awards to the club. In August 1999, being selected as one of the best national plays, *Jinzi* served as an opening performance in the 50<sup>th</sup> national anniversary and was highly acclaimed by the experts and the audiences.

In June 2002, Chuanju *Jinzi* was perform at the Seoul art festival and Hwaseong Fortress international Theatre Festival for eight times in total as a Sino-Korean cultural exchange activity during the World Cup, and it was praised extensively.

In February 2004, the Chuanju's adaption of *The Wilderness* was invited to Toulouse, France for the sack of "Sino-France cultural year." It was highly valued by the local government and treasured by the audiences, which laid a solid foundation for

highlighting Chinese culture and promoting Chuanju abroad. During that time, the CEO of GRUBER, Miss Beatrice Gruber, came to watch it deliberately from Paris. She was so charmed by *Jinzi* that she promoted this play heartfully, having more than ten theatre managers from major cities across France fly to Chongqing, negotiating on *Jinzi's* business tour in France. Beatrice Gruber believed that the dramatic tense of *Jinzi* could compete with that of Shakespeare and the great tragedy in ancient Greek. The distinctiveness of Chuanju amazed the French with a brand-new experience. In 2006, a two-month performing tour of *Jinzi* in 20 cities of France indeed further enhanced *The Wilderness's* international influence.

In January 1992, Washington theatre promoted the opera version of *The Wilderness* in one of the most prestigious theatre — the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, marking the debut of a modern opera created by Chinese composers performed in the Western theatre. This play was edited by Cao's daughter, Wan Fang, composed by Jin Xiang and starred mostly by Chinese actors, with Li Daoyi working as its art advisor. Meanwhile, since both its musical conductor, Paulette, and its director Major were American, this play was also an embodiment of international collaboration. Its premiere ended with five-minutes applause and acclaim. Major defined it as an outstanding work generated from the marriage of Chinese and western music. The largest-issued American newspaper, USA Today, declared that "one of the most remarkable cultural event is that Chinese musicians became an important part of the western opera art".

In July 1997, the Shanghai Opera House obtained great success in Germany and Switzerland. During the time they were performing in Germany, the chairman of Switzerland music festival praised that "*The Wilderness* is the best Chinese opera and it enchanted Switzerland...there is no boundary for music, and that of *The Wilderness* joined us together." Through the form of opera, *The Wilderness* cast its influence on America, Germany, and Switzerland. While enjoying the beauty of Chinese opera, audiences could also appreciate Cao's exquisite dramatic art.

To further advocate Chinese classics and to strengthen the cultural bound between China and foreign countries, Shanghai Opera House adapted Cao's *Thunderstorm* into an opera eight years later.

On August 11<sup>th</sup>, 2016, Shanghai Opera House landed the UK by putting on Mo Fan's opera version of Cao's *Thunderstorm* in London Coliseum. A "Shanghai Performing season" was held, drawing intense attention from the British media, and the local press posted a lot of in-depth reports on the performing season, especially on *Thunderstorm*.

In 1981, the movie version *The Wilderness* was shot by NanHai Film, a subsidiary company of China News Service. Ling Zi directed this colour wide-screen movie. In

September 1981, it was exhibited in the 38<sup>th</sup> Venice Film Festival held in Italy, and overwhelmed the foreign press, gaining the honour of "the most recommended masterpiece in the world."

TV is the most potent contemporary media. During this time, Cao's works extended its influence through TV programs. In 1987, a documentary, *An Outstanding Playwriter, Cao Yu*, was filmed by CCTV (China Central Television) and Shanghai Theatre Academy, and by presenting colleges of the performance of Cao's seven plays, such as *Thunderstorm*, *Sunrise*, and *The Wilderness*, it introduced Cao's artistic feature thoroughly. In 1991, it was shown to the foreign counterparts in the "China Drama Exhibition" held in Tokyo, Japan, systematically introducing Cao's creating progress and artistic achievement through the TV for the first time.

During the 40 years after the Opening of China, Cao's works were not only treasured by Chinese but also acknowledged by people abroad. In Cao's hometown Qianjiang, the international seminar on Cao's works was held four times, and the China Cao Yu Theatre festival was held in Tianjin three times. According to rough estimations, Cao's plays have been played in 5 continents, and enjoy high popularity in 28 countries, including Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Singapore, Philippines, Syria, Russia, Uzbekistan, Germany, Czech Republic, Hungary, Switzerland, USA, Canada, Brazil, and Australia etc., and derived into 28 performing forms such as movies, TV series, operas, dance dramas, musicals, Jingju, Huju, Qinqiang, Chuanju, Huangmeixi, and Pingtan. Cao is entitled as the "Chinese Shakespeare", and he is undoubtedly the most outstanding world-class playwright in Chinese.

Chairman Xi emphasized that we should "Carry forward the national spirit and promote the contemporary cultural achievements which are based on our domestic situation while embracing the world." There's no doubt that with the enhancement of Chinese comprehensive national power and international cultural exchange, Cao's works shall make their appearance in global stages with higher frequency in various forms. Thus, they shall make grander contributions to affirming our cultural confidence and fuelling the prosperity of Socialist Culture!

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# Cruelty: A Modern Analysis of Cao Yu's Drama

SONG BAOZHEN

**ABSTRACT** From the awakening of Chinese world consciousness in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the extensive introduction of western modernist art in literary and artistic circles during the May 4<sup>th</sup> period, it can be said that a completely new modern consciousness has injected new qualities into China's ancient cultural traditions. However, the history of modern Chinese drama is short, with limited creative methods, techniques, and experiences. As Chinese audiences are heavily focused on music, singing, dancing, acrobatics and storytelling, there exists a gap between their life experiences and ability to appreciate the aesthetics of modern drama. As a result, Chinese modernist drama that embodied Chinese elements and Chinese modernist consciousness—be it scripts or performances—were not warmly welcomed and often had lonely and silent endings. It was not until the 1930s that Cao Yu, an outstanding modern Chinese playwright, changed the destiny of modern Chinese drama, which was indifferent to the mainstream culture, thus starting the trend of integrating modernist art with local Chinese culture. In the development of modern Chinese drama, Cao Yu is undoubtedly the writer with the most modern aesthetic. Both his drama creation and drama concepts are modern. In a sense, Cao Yu can be considered a modern dramatist with Chinese characteristics.

## I. The Pain of Life and Modern Anxiety

Cao Yu's modernity is not manifested as modern decadence, but is full of modern anxiety. In his creative consciousness, he concentrates on the anxieties of life, the anxieties of human nature, the anxieties of society, the anxieties of the city, and even the anxieties of mankind and the anxieties of the universe. It can even be said that his anxiety is innate. As his daughter Wanfang, who understands his spiritual state,

says, "pain is his nature".<sup>1</sup> Such a nature may be unfortunate for an ordinary person, but for a superb playwright with extraordinary artistic thinking, it is a talent for which to be thankful.

The word "anxiety" originates from the Hindi word "angh", which is related to "narrowness" and "restraint". It is a typical psychological phenomenon, reflected in almost everybody but to different degrees. According to Verena Custer, "when we feel an accumulation of unpleasant excitement, we call it anxiety. Anxiety is a form of excitement that is unpleasant".<sup>2</sup> While modern anxiety in artistic thinking is also expressed to some extent in the



■ Cao Yu in 1940

above way, modern anxiety is mainly not an emotional reaction to one's own situation, but a sense of existence with universal meaning and spiritual reflection. The cruel aesthetics in Cao Yu's plays discussed in this paper are based on observing his creative psychology and the aesthetic modernity presented in his art.

The connotation of modern anxiety accumulates as deep depression, which constitutes a huge conflict between emotions and will. This leads dramatists to produce a type of "anxious fantasy", which rises into artistic imagination and condenses into dramatic image and dramatic situations. Among modern playwrights, there are hardly any like Cao Yu, whose heart was burning with profound modern anxiety, whose chest was silted with deep depression, and who had such vivid artistic imagination soaring within his consciousness.

Cao Yu had an unusual sense of depression, which did not come from material difficulties or oppression but often from the mental pressure he was sensitive to. This made him feel strongly that the environment he was exposed to was unbearable. Cao Yu's inner anxiety in his life was very prominent, and he was unusually depressed in his childhood before he even knew anything about the world. In his bright eyes, there was always deep depression, which surprised his father Wan Dezun, who had a rough life and knew the ways of the world. He once asked Cao Yu, "where did you get so much depression at such a young age?!"<sup>3</sup>

1 Wan Fang. *The Stone of the Soul, Listening to Thunderstorm*. Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House, 2000, p.15.

2 Verena Custer [Switzerland]. *Overcoming Anxiety*, translated by Chen Ying, Sanlian Bookstore, January, 2003, p.11.

3 Tian Benxiang. *A Biography of Cao Yu*—Chapter 1, The Depression of Childhood, Beijing October Art and Literature Publishing House, 1988.



In fact, if we understand the unusual circumstances of Cao Yu's life and the mental trauma he suffered in his youth, we would not be surprised by his depression, anxiety, and sensitivity. Cao Yu's mother died three days after he was born. His stepmother was his aunt, but she was an opium addict like his irascible father. Their upside-down lives often made Cao Yu feel that his family was as silent as a grave. The loneliness and pain of losing his parents in his early years had been hidden in Cao Yu's deep consciousness. Such experiences growing up may not make such a strong spiritual impression on an ordinary person, but for Cao Yu, his feelings were so delicate and sensitive that these misfortunes, sadness, depression, and lonely indignation formed the background of his life.

His special sensitivity to life and his anxieties about life branded the cruelty of the world on Cao Yu's mind as a boy. When he was a child, his nanny, Duan Ma, told him about tragic family affairs, which made him feel the hardships of life and the cruelty of the world. After the family moved to Xuanhua town, the dark, gloomy, old, and mysterious sacred tree on the mountain left him in fear and awe of nature. In Xuanhua where his father served as an official, Cao Yu witnessed bloody scenes of violent government officials whipping "prisoners", and the cruelty undoubtedly shocked him and penetrated his bones. Once in his youth when Cao Yu was traveling, he saw prostitutes standing on the streets of Taiyuan like the living dead, and a kind of dizziness, anxiety, sadness, and fear arose spontaneously from the bottom of his heart. On the eve of the outbreak of the Anti-Japanese War, Cao Yu was teaching in Nanjing and lived very close to the prison. Every day in the stillness of the night, the sound of executions and screaming came from the prison, and the world around him suddenly seemed to turn into a hell of howling ghosts and wolves.

Cao Yu lamented his life when he was still in middle school. In his poem *Before Long, Before Long*, he repeatedly chanted "my future ends before long":

Ah, Dad, soon I'll be cold / sleeping in the weeds, / and my soul will be  
always be / singing with you in the deep forest!

I want to find a deep and dark gully / to be my tomb.

I look at the silent moon kissing / the speechless ghost, / clear light  
shining on / the pale face. / Ah, it is such a realm that fascinates me. /  
My future ends before long.<sup>1</sup>

While the poem expresses Cao Yu's inexplicable sadness in adolescence, more than that, it shows his sincerity in jumping out of the flow of time and questioning the meaning of life.

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<sup>1</sup> Cao Yu, *The Complete Works of Cao Yu*, Volume 6. Huashan Literature and Art Publishing House, 1996, p. 22.



■ Cao Yu and Ba Jin in the 1980s

Cao Yu's own experiences, his father's early death, his family's decline, and his sister's tragic death all put a squeeze on his life, became the sadness in his soul and put him through the suffering mill of fate. Thus, in his consciousness, he naturally developed a sense of a nameless melancholy, questioning and reflecting on the meaning of existence and reasons for living.

Modern anxiety is firstly a question of "existence", how to exist and how it exists. Bell said, "modernism is often concerned with the question of how to survive in the context of new ideas or new worldviews".<sup>1</sup> This is the philosophical question that modernist drama seeks to answer. These existentialist philosophies—from Kierkegaard to Heidegger, and then to Sartre and Camus—have closely linked anxiety to existence to varying degrees. While we may not be able to assert that Cao Yu was an existentialist, his anxieties in life were closely related to anxieties about the existence of the world and the universe.

If we look at the motivations for his creation of *Thunderstorm*, we can clearly understand Cao Yu's modern anxiety. He said, "I do not know how to express myself. I have always been depressed and dark. Even if I sometimes show pleasure in front of people, I am constantly troubled by myself when I am alone. I do not know what tranquillity is in all these years. I do not know myself. I do not have 'self-knowledge'—that wisdom of the Greeks. I cannot make sense of my life aside from the feeling of haste and urgency in my heart".<sup>2</sup> As can be seen from the description

1 Michael Bell. *Modernism Metaphysics, Modernism*. Liaoning Education Press, 2002, p. 13.

2 Cao Yu. *Thunderstorm*-Preface, Cultural Life Press, 1936, p. 1.

here, Cao Yu seemed to be suffering from modern anxiety. In *Sunrise*-Postscript, this kind of modern anxiety is even more prominent: "What I should confess is that I am still young. I have a habit that most young people cannot control. The problem haunts me. I cannot wait to search for an answer. When I think hard, I feel dizzy and uncomfortable. I sweat and hit myself impatiently. It is as if I have ingested a fatal drug by mistake. I have been wandering in this bizarre society all these years and have seen many nightmarish people. I will never forget these impressions until the day I die. How many serious problems have they turned into? They assault me relentlessly, heating up my emotions and increasing my sense of injustice. Like a fever patient, I feel that there is a desperate ghost beside me all day, urging me and torturing me, so that I cannot get a moment of peace."<sup>1</sup>

It is almost impossible to imagine the degree of tension that Cao Yu's modern anxiety had reached. It was as if he was suffering from a plague, and was plunged into "endless cruel disappointment". He felt deeply that "a bunch of unfair and bloody facts was stabbing [his] heart like a sharp knife, leading to [his] uncontrollable wrath". He wrote that, "sometimes I also wonder, for which [case is my wrath being incurred]? Who asked me to do that? These sleepless nights, I have been pacing and dragging through a cage-sized room like a trapped animal, staring blankly in despair with my bloodshot eyes, looking at the low black roof above the head. I felt that the dark sky outside the window, the dark world around, and everything seemed to have been buried in the grave without a trace of movement. I screamed desperately, maybe I wanted everything to be destroyed at the time. I felt that the universe seemed to shrink into a dark mass, so that I could not breathe. The wet and sticky thing was my black hand grasping a handful of earth tightly. Lighting a match, I was shocked to see the blood. A gully of blood had been cut into the black thumb by the fragments of the porcelain figure, and drops of delightful blood slowly flowed out."<sup>2</sup> He was pursuing life and torturing it. The anxiety itself was "cruel" and absolutely modern—even rare among foreign modernist playwrights. Modern anxiety acted on his subjective consciousness as if he were examining the suffering of the world through a huge magnifying glass, which enabled him to feel the cruelty behind common phenomena of the world. It is from the cruel aesthetic ideas that Cao Yu draws forth the aesthetic modernity of his plays.

The external cause of modern anxiety in the creative consciousness of modern Chinese playwrights was their confusion about the universe and life, and their perception of the oppression of their own existence. Although old social structures had disintegrated, the ghost of feudal ethics still lingered on in China. The dawn of

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1 Cao Yu. *Sunrise*-Postscript, *Complete Works of Cao Yu*, Volume 1, Huashan Literature and Art Publishing House, 1996, p. 380.

2 *Ibid.* P. 381.

modern society seemed imminent but in reality, there was political decadence, people were destitute, and there was frequent civil strife and social disorder everywhere. This generation was doomed to suffer from the fate of having nowhere to go after waking up, because their souls and bodies were inextricably linked to the past they hated. Such life experiences were quite representative of intellectuals in the May 4<sup>th</sup> period.

The internal motivation that constituted the modern anxiety of Chinese playwrights came from the self-consciousness of the playwrights to excavate their own souls and the huge conflicts within their hearts. These profound contradictions between emotions, feelings and thoughts constituted profound emotional crisis and spiritual crisis. Ye Weilian once pointed out that, "in fact, since the May 4<sup>th</sup> movement against imperialism and feudalism, Chinese writers have been exiled into cultural emptiness, where they were seeking, hesitating, wandering, chasing, and waiting for a sign pointing to the way out, which would never come. They continued to ask questions and often fell into desperation." Lu Xun said, "I don't want to wander between the light and the dark. I would rather sink in the dark. However, I finally wandered between the light and the dark ..." (*Farewell to the Shadow*). Lu Xun was the first person to reveal this situation. He hoped to find an instruction on the tablet, but only saw the remnants: "there was a wandering soul, who turned into a long snake with venomous fangs. He did not bite others but bit himself, and finally died." From *Inscription on A Tablet*, "he who wanted know his own taste decided to eat himself, but how could he know the original taste when suffering terribly from sharp pain? After the pain settled, he ate it slowly, but the heart was getting old, so how could he know the original taste?" "Lost in search but gaining nothing, exploring the inner heart but knowing nothing about it", reflects the pain of exiling the roots of modern Chinese national culture. For the same reason, Wen Yiduo's poems were full of "the desire of death", and he wanted to die and be reborn—"let the rot get worse ... rot my armor, rot my prison and my claustrophobic soul, then I will wear a green vest and jump out smiling" (*Rotten Fruit*). Ye Weilian believed that "this is an acute pain unique to Chinese modernism, and may also be the severe pain experienced by other Eastern countries in modern times".<sup>1</sup>

This image of "eating one's own heart" and "not knowing its taste" but insisting on eating it anyway typically reflects a cruel attitude towards the self in the creative mentality of modern Chinese writers. This cruelty is not intentional self-abuse, but abandoning the old self and pursuing a phoenix and nirvana-like purification and sublimation. Lu Xun especially, praised the "great cruelty" and "depth of soul" in the novels of Dostoevsky, who was the pioneer of Russian modernism. Lu Xun said, "Dostoevsky unexpectedly appeared as a sinner with deep sins, and also as a cruel torturer. He put the men and women in the novel in situations of unbearable hardship

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1 Ye Weilian. *Reflection on Interpretation of Modern and Postmodern Living Space and Cultural Space*. Taipei Dongda Book Company, 1992, p. 14.



■ *The Family*, 1948

to test them. He not only stripped away the purity on the surface and interrogated the evil hidden underneath, but also tortured the purity hidden under the sin. He also refused to let them die easily and tried to keep them alive for a long time. Dostoevsky seemed to be distressed together with him, and happy with the interrogator. This is by no means something that ordinary people can achieve. In short, it is because of greatness.”<sup>1</sup> Lu Xun's description of the aesthetic features of Dostoevsky's novels also in a sense, reflected the tendencies of his own creative psychology. Cao Yu, like Lu Xun, was also a great writer with a deep sense of self-directed cruelty.

Cao Yu's modern anxiety manifested in his care for people, human nature and mankind. Human nature is complex, and Cao Yu had a complex and profound understanding of human beings and mankind. His understanding of the human existence is a kind of anxiety that is full of contradictions. He loved human beings and mankind, but he also hated human beings. He pitied them and hoped for them to be free, but he hated them for playing tricks on themselves. From a metaphysical perspective, he was full of compassion for life in the universe. He said, "writing *Thunderstorm* is an urgent need of emotion. I remember how poor human beings are, with a sense of complacency, as if they were the masters of their own destiny when they often are not. Their emotions and reason tease them, by unknowable forces of opportunities or circumstances. Living in a narrow cage and proudly thinking that they are in a free world— isn't mankind, which is often called the lord of all things,

1 Lu Xun. *Story of Dostovsky. Complete Works of Lu Xun*, Volume 6. People's Literature Publishing House, 1981, p. 411.

doing the most foolish thing?"<sup>1</sup> Observing life from the perspective of reality, Cao Yu was full of sorrow for human weakness and destiny. In his view, human beings were poor, foolish animals. They cannot dominate their own destiny, but are always rushing forward blindly. For Cao Yu, the existence of human beings is the tragedy. In a society that violates the laws of nature by "taking from those with less to enrich those who are well-off", he also hated people. He said, "I hate some stubborn animals in the crowd who pretend to be 'human'. They do not listen to the screams in the wilderness as if they were deaf. They close their eyes and would rather be moles in burrows, avoiding the sunshine and sticking their heads in their folly like ostriches."<sup>2</sup>

Cao Yu's feelings about reality reflected Baudelaire's comment on Edger Allen Poe's feelings about America that he expressed in his poems: "America is just a huge prison for Poe. He rushes about in it with fanatical turbulence. He was born to breathe in a more immoral world (the great beast shrouded by the gas lamp). His inner and spiritual life, as a poet or a drunkard, was nothing more than a continuous effort to get rid of the influence of this hostile atmosphere."<sup>3</sup>

However, the key is that Cao Yu had a great compassionate mind for life in the universe, and even a philosophy of great compassion. He said, "I use a compassionate mood to write the disputes of characters in the plays. I sincerely hope the people who are watching the play can look down upon the people on the ground with a compassionate eye ... to look compassionately down at the creatures that squirm underneath — how they argue blindly, roll around unconsciously in the fire pit of emotions like loaches. They are using all their efforts to save themselves, but do not know that the abyss in front is opening its huge mouth waiting for them. They are like a thin horse that falls in the marsh — the more they struggle, the deeper they sink into the marsh of death."<sup>4</sup>

Cao Yu not only had modern anxiety that went beyond that of ordinary people, but he also had a great mind and broad vision that transcended this anxiety. It is obvious that he had profound humanistic concern in his great compassion, which is not the norm in general humanitarianism. In Cao Yu's concept of life, there are traces of the influence of traditional Chinese philosophy and even Buddhist factors.

From Cao Yu's modern anxiety, we can explore the secret world of Cao Yu's dramatic aesthetics, and further understand the aesthetic modernity presented in his plays.

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1 Cao Yu. *Thunderstorm*-Preface. Cultural Life Press, 1936, pp. 5-6.

2 Cao Yu. *Sunrise*-Postscript. *Complete Works of Cao Yu*, Volume 1, Huashan Literature and Art Publishing House, 1996, p. 382.

3 Baudelaire[France]. *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe. The Salon of 1846*, Guangxi Normal University Press, 2002, p.149.

4 Cao Yu. *Thunderstorm*-Preface. Cultural Life Press, 1936, p. 6.

## II. Modern Connotations of Cruel Drama Imagery

In the 1930s, in the west of the world, Antonin Artaud—an artist who was influenced by Eastern drama and became the founder of postmodernist drama—was brewing and putting forward his aesthetic idea of "cruel drama". In 1932, he published the first manifesto of "cruel drama"; in 1933, he issued the second manifesto; in 1935, he founded the "cruel theatre". In 1938, Artaud's theory of cruel drama—*Drama and Its Double Shadow*—was published. The "cruel" concept of cruel drama attracted increased attention and Artaud himself became the originator of postmodernist drama.

Almost at the same time as Artaud, Cao Yu embarked on the path to create Chinese-style cruel drama. Although he never put forward the slogan of "cruel drama", he made similar statements in a series of prefaces and postscripts of his plays. He felt the cruelty of the universe deeply, and the world and his modern anxiety was concentrated in his cruel philosophy and cruel aesthetics. There was a cruel beauty that melted into and condensed in his plays. However, this did not come from Antonin Artaud, nor from the influence of other Western artists, but from Cao Yu, a Chinese person living in a modern city who meditated on philosophy, and the aesthetics of life and the world.

In Cao Yu's consciousness, the world and the universe were too cruel, so he wanted to show this cruelty in his plays. Thus, "cruelty" became the potential and motivation to disturb his soul and drive his creation. Cao Yu said, "what *Thunderstorm* shows is not cause and effect, nor retribution, but the "cruelty" between heaven and earth that I feel (the sufferings of Sifeng and Zhou Chong are the most representative of this kind of natural "coldness" since they are not to blame for their deaths). If the reader is willing to carefully understand this intention—although the play sometimes attracts attention for several tense scenes, or one or two characters—it constantly and subtly shows the "cruelty" and "coldness" of the struggle in the universe".<sup>1</sup>

Cao Yu is not a philosopher, but here he shows a kind of aesthetic vision for the philosophy of the universe. Therefore, the composition of his sense of tragedy is not a partial or individual factor, nor a simple sociological one, but a comprehensive understanding of the "coldness" and "cruelty" of the world and the universe. He also described the characteristics of the universe in *Thunderstorm*, likening the universe to a "cruel well" such that "if you fall into it, you cannot escape from this dark pit no matter how hard you cry out".<sup>2</sup> No matter who it is, no matter when and where, it is hard to resist and escape the doomed cruel encounter and tragic ending. In the world

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1 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 7.



of *Thunderstorm*, the deaths of Zhou Chong and Sifeng are natural embodiments of the universe's "coldness", while Zhou Ping, Fan Yi and Shi Ping are also victims of coldness. In *Sunrise*, the fates of Chen Bailu, Cuixi, Xiaodongxi and Huang Xingsan show the evil of the modern capitalist system and prostitution system. The world of Qiu Hu and Jinzi in *The Wilderness* is an even darker world that is hard to escape.

Cruelty has become a self-evident aesthetic principle in Cao Yu's plays, and a sharp tool for him to reveal the beauty of the world and discover a new world of aesthetics. This may have a hint of the cruel fates in ancient Greek tragedies, or the cruelty of the soul in O'Neill's dramas, but more importantly, it is Cao Yu's own life discovery. In *Thunderstorm*, all dramatic coincidences are cruel and destructive. What a coincidence and how cruel the reunion between Shiping and Zhou Puyuan! The bad luck Shiping suffered 30 years ago is almost repeated with Sifeng. This is naturally cruel for Sifeng, and even more cruel to Shiping who is suffering from a double blow of fate. Antonin Artaud said, "the cruelty I am talking about refers to the more terrible and inevitable cruelty that things may impose on us". He also said, "the cruelty I am talking about refers to the desire of life, the severity of universe and the inevitability of life".<sup>1</sup> The cruelty of Cao Yu's plays reflects this inevitability.

Modernist drama has many characteristics, and the most aesthetically outstanding one is its discovery of the deep, inner, and secret spiritual world. Cruelty was Cao Yu's discovery, which ignited his soul, inspired his perception, and helped him discover the secrets of the world. Therefore, his plays display a cruel beauty which had never been discovered by his predecessors. The soul with cruel beauty, and people and things with cruel beauty, together constitute the unique tragic aesthetic connotation of Cao Yu's dramas.

Cao Yu discovered the character of Fanyi because of the cruelty revelation. In China, Fanyi's character is surly, sinister, and vicious. It can be said that this character is inherently cruel: "she is a sharp knife—the more she loves, the more deeply she will make a mark". Indeed, "her life is interwoven with the cruellest love and the most unbearable hate". She is like a demon who has grasped Zhou Ping tightly. This desperate love is cruel. Fanyi herself goes crazy for this unreachable love, and her ending is also cruel. Michel Foucault once said, "the last kind of madness is the madness of desperate lust. The love that is disappointing because of excessive love, especially the love that is fooled by death, has no way out but to resort to madness."<sup>2</sup> Fanyi is also very cold to Sifeng—she even pulls in her son Zhou Chong, having no consideration of any self-respect of being a mother. These are inhuman cruelties. However, the cruelty of Fanyi's character lies in the cruelty directed at herself. "The

1 Antonin Artaud[France]. *Drama and Its Double Shadow*. China Drama Publishing House, 1993, p.76,101.

2 Foucault[United States]. *Madness and Civilization*. SDX Joint Publishing Company, 1999, p. 28.

heat of love drives her heart crazy", and she does not hesitate to burn herself in the thunderbolt of emotions.

The so-called aesthetic modernity is anti-institutional and anti-traditional in nature. There has never been a character like Fanyi in the traditional Chinese drama gallery. This is a woman who rebelled frantically against ethics, tradition, and the system. It is precisely in such a character's vicious and surly personality that Cao Yu finds out that Fanyi has a "beautiful heart" — "she has a strong heart", and "is worthy of praise".<sup>1</sup>

If Cao Yu only discovered the external cruelty and general cruelty of things, we cannot say that he is modern. In a sense, Cao Yu and Lu Xun have some similarities. They are good at discovering the spiritual tragedy of people in specific historical situations, and are good at revealing the oppression of the spirit from the perspective of the human soul.

*Sunrise* is about Chen Bailu's spiritual tragedy. All of Chen Bailu's sufferings show the spiritual fall and spiritual tragedy in which an intellectual woman influenced by the May 4<sup>th</sup> movement steps into society, but finally has no way to go. She is sober — she is soberly aware of her depravity, and deeply understands that she is trapped in the quagmire and unable to extricate herself. The pain of awareness is a cruel pain. "The sun raises, the darkness stays behind, but the sun is not ours, we are going to sleep." This is Cao Yu's discovery of modern tragedy. The evil money-oriented society forces Chen Bailu into extreme spiritual pain. At the same time, it corrodes her soul, causing her to fall into unresolvable self-conflict, and eventually leads to her mental collapse and suicide. *Sunrise* shows the "devouring power" of modern urban civilization on the human spirit. This is a terrible cruel killing force — it completely forbids hope, destroys people's souls, corrodes people's will, distorts people's minds, and mercilessly destroys the people in it with superficial principles of fairness that have been institutionalised.

The helplessness of life and the sorrow of existence act on the playwright's creative consciousness, deepen the inner pain of Cao Yu's spirit, and also deepen his cruel examination of life, which is especially obvious in the inscription of *Sunrise*: "When will the sun die? I am willing to die with it." It reveals the warmth and sincerity of the soul in the expression of despair and coldness, just like the Hungarian poem, Petofi, quoted by Lu Xun — "despair is illusory, just as hope is illusory".<sup>2</sup>

The cruelty of this spiritual tragedy is best reflected in the tragedy of Qiu Hu. The world shown in *The Wilderness* is full of darkness, hatred, fears and ferocity, which makes

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1 Cao Yu. *Thunderstorm*-Preface. Cultural Life Press, 1936, p.10-11.

2 Lu Xun. Hope. *The Complete Works of Lu Xun*, Volume 2. People's Literature Publishing House, 1981, p.173.



■ Cao Yu in Trafalgar Square, London, 1980

people feel that "only the hatred of human beings is exploding and boiling there". For thousands of years, the heavy burden of the conventional belief that "a son should avenge his father" plunged the heart of Qiu Hu into a dark hell. This ancient concept gnawed at him, and tortured him. The black forest is a symbol of a cruel prison of the mind that one can never break away from.

In *Peking Man*, the characters seem to be living calm daily lives on the surface. There are no particularly fierce conflicts, and there are no explosive scenes. However, there are hidden swords that stab the souls of human beings, and sharp weapons that devour and strangle the soul. This is an extremely cold and dark kingdom. The suffering of Su Fang's soul is profound and cruel. She not only lives under the pressure of Siyi's cold spirit, but also suffers from Zeng Hao's dirty and dark soul. The Zeng's courtyard is like a frozen world, and the emotional relationship between people seems to freeze into ice. As for the kind-hearted Su Fang, the great patience in her character and the hidden pain in her heart reflect the cruelty of the Zeng's environment. Wenqing, is a weak and lonely man who was talented. It is such a living environment that suffocates his desire for life, strangles his talent, and makes him a mentally paralyzed and spiritually empty person through chronic poisoning. The life in the Zeng's house has turned him into the living dead with a shell of a life. The Zeng family is not only a frightening place, but also a place where killing takes place without blood being spilled. It is a demonic cave that quietly destroys the vitality of life and purity of the soul.

In Cao Yu's dramas, his cruel philosophy is often built into a cruel world. There are many dramatic images with symbolic and aesthetic meanings that contain meanings of cruelty.

When it comes to drama, Antonin Artaud, the creator of cruel drama, said, "all plots are cruel, and drama must be rebuild on this kind of thinking which transcends all extreme plots".<sup>1</sup> In Cao Yu's plays, despite not being as absolute as Artaud's conception of cruel drama, the plot is cruel, the scene is cruel, and the environment is cruel—all of which form dramatic images that are shocking and soul-shaking.

### III. The Aesthetic Form of Expressionism

The above discussion has revealed Cao Yu's unique modern anxiety and the cruel drama aesthetic style condensed by this modern anxiety. Next, we should further study the performance characteristics of Cao Yu's aesthetic modernity.

Burger, a famous German modernist scholar, pointed out that the typical forms of modernism are symbolism, aestheticism and expressionism, and its basic characteristics are embodied in the pursuit of aesthetic self-discipline.<sup>2</sup> When people evaluate Cao Yu as a master of realism, they naturally focus on the realistic level of his artistic expression and the social significance. However, if we examine the aesthetic connotation and the inner soul of his plays more deeply, we will find that his plays are quite different from general realistic plays. Therefore, if some of his plays are included in the expressionist drama category, it may be easier to understand their aesthetic connotation and the overall charm of the situational atmosphere. As for the form of expression, Cao Yu's plays are similar to some of O'Neill's. Some scholars generalize the style of Cao Yu's plays as poetic realism, that is to say, they hope to distinguish its aesthetic form from general realism. In a specific sense, the so-called "poeticization" refers to "expressionism" and "symbolization". The generalizations in these theories are the results of previous studies, but there are inevitable limitations to any generalization. Starting from the proposition of aesthetic modernity of Chinese drama, when we go deeper into Cao Yu's plays, we find that the essence of his plays is modernity—even Chinese-style modernity.

Cao Yu said, "realistic things cannot be so realistic".<sup>3</sup> The characteristics of the aesthetic modernity of Cao Yu's drama can be summarized as the combination of performance and reality, or the integration of expressionism and realism, with the expressionist component being more prominent. The reason we say Cao Yu's

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1 Christopher Ines, *Modernism in Drama, Modernism*. Liaoning Education Press, 2002, p.193.

2 Zhou Xian, *The Tension of Modernity*. Capital Normal University Press, 2001, p.25.

3 Cao Yu, Talking about *Peking Man*, *Complete Works of Cao Yu*, Volume 7. Huashan Literature and Art Publishing House, 1996, p. 76.

dramatic style is mainly expressionist is not based entirely on his dramatic techniques and skills, but on his modern aesthetic consciousness. There is a kind of aesthetic attraction and reference between Cao Yu and O'Neill. It is not difficult to find the fusion and connection with O'Neill's expressionist drama aesthetics in Cao Yu's plays.

For example, "primitive emotions", or "primitivism" in modernism penetrates and permeates Cao Yu's plays. When it comes to the original motivation of the creation of *Thunderstorm*, Cao Yu said, "in addition to having a fuzzy image of *Thunderstorm*, what interests me is only one or two plots, several characters, and a complex yet primitive emotion". Moreover, he sometimes said that this primitive emotion was very mysterious: "the emotion inherent in *Thunderstorm* has become an ineffable longing for many mysterious things in the universe. *Thunderstorm* can be said to be my 'legacy of savageness'. I, like a primitive ancestor, have widened my eyes in amazement at those incomprehensible phenomena. I cannot conclude that the writing of *Thunderstorm* is driven by the supernatural, by fate or some other power. What *Thunderstorm* symbolizes emotionally is a mysterious attraction to me—a kind of devil that grasps my heart."<sup>1</sup> *Thunderstorm* is permeated with the mystery of fate, the writer's sense of mystery towards characters and events in *Thunderstorm*, as well as fear and mystery towards nature manifested in lightning and thunder.

Mystery, primitiveness, fear, nightmares—these are almost typical features of expressionist drama. In O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*, the protagonist of the drama—the black Jones—was kidnapped by white men to become a slave in the United States, but he could not accept a civilization ruled by might so he killed the white steward and prison guards, fled to a desert island, and declared himself emperor amongst the indigenous people. When Jones was chased by the white man, he fled into the forest. In the black forest, a spiritual journey in Jones' subconscious mind was revealed—a review of his ethnic history and his escape, the mysteriousness of the great forests, the primitive horror, and the cruelty of deprivation of human nature. It was on the way back to the primitive savage state that Jones restored his true humanity. Here, the playwright's admiration of primitivism is a critique of so-called modern civilization.

In *The Wilderness*, Cao Yu wrote about Qiu Hu, a farmer whose family was destroyed by the cannibalistic "Jiao Yanwang". Qiu Hu escaped from prison, thinking that "a son should avenge his father", and the ancient idea of revenge haunted his soul like a ghost until he finally killed his childhood friend, Jiao Daxing, the son of Jiao Yanwang. After that, Qiu Hu fled into the black forest, "where he was surrounded by the horror of life, the absurd imagination of primitive people", and where "fear was crouching everywhere". It was like "giant animals open their bloody mouths", full of "ferocious

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1 Cao Yu. *Thunderstorm*-Preface. Cultural Life Press, 1936, p.7.



■ *Peking Man*, 1980

terror", "mystery of the wilderness", ghostly "strange and quiet", and full of "primitive cruelty" and the "terror of life". In the play, Cao Yu described Qiu Hu's situation as follows: "fear grasps his mind, and he is like his ancestor, the primitive ape man ... hope, recollection, terror, and resentment attack his imagination continuously, which makes his hallucinations suddenly and abnormally active. In the dark wilderness, we cannot find a trace of his 'ugliness'. On the contrary, we gradually find that he is beautiful and worthy of noble sympathy. He represents a real person who is oppressed by all kinds of things. The injustice he suffered is repeated in the forest. In the prelude, the cunning, evil and deceitful nature gradually disappears, just as Jinzi's torment in the middle of the night is sublimated into spirituality by the love of Qiu Hu's body".<sup>1</sup> This passage had been ignored by researchers in the past, but it shows the original intention of Cao Yu for Qiu Hu to become a "real person" of "beauty" after waking up from revenge and madness, and who is also sublimated to the existence of "spirituality". Here, the "primitive ape man", as the opposite of mechanical and institutional modernity, shows the resistance of human beings to the increasing separation of material and spirit, as well as the desire of human beings to find their lost selves and restore their souls. Therefore, the aesthetic modernity embodied by the "primitive ape man" is very clear.

Michael Bell pointed out that "as a literary tradition, primitivism allows civilized people to examine and satisfy themselves through an imaginary opposite. It is often a subject of self-criticism within culture, such as Montaigne's article on cannibalism. However, in the period of modernism, the thorough suspicion of contemporary civilization and

1 Cao Yu. *The Wilderness*. Cultural Life Press, 1937, p.251.

the careful study of tribal people give a new advantage to the primitive impulse."<sup>1</sup> In Cao Yu's opinion, the primitive emotion is also the emotion of the "thorough doubt of contemporary civilization". With the help of this kind of emotion, we can express doubt, criticism and thinking about people in the current situation and the system that restricts them. In *Peking Man*, Cao Yu criticizes the weakness, incompetence and depravity of civilized contemporary people with the help of an anthropologist, Yuan Rengan, and the huge projection of the "Peking Man". As for modernism, primitivism is not only a kind of thought, but also a common technique in artistic expression. "Primitivism is a typical technique of dramatic modernism", said Christopher Innes.<sup>2</sup>

We may as well look at O'Neill's plays such as *Desire Under the Elms*, *Anna Christie*, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, *The Emperor Jones* and so on. They also have such primitive emotions, nameless fears, unpredictable fates, and unpredictable visions. However, it would be a big mistake to think that Cao Yu was following O'Neill's dramatic technique. The mystery, primitive emotions, fears, and so on of Cao Yu's plays come from his sensitive feeling, rich imagination, and interwoven emotions, as well as the accumulation of ancient Chinese culture in the depths of his spirit. Such factors constituted the national character of his drama aesthetics.

Anxiety is the basis of fear. Fear is accompanied by anxiety. There is also fear in anxiety. Cao Yu's fear in creating *Thunderstorm* was born of anxiety, which promoted anxious fantasy and produced an imaginary artistic picture. He said, "*Thunderstorm* is an emotional vision, a representation of nameless fears. The attraction of this vision is just like listening to the elders with wrinkles on their faces when you are young, telling the story of the ghost fire on the grave and zombies at the wild temple in the dark midnight. The skin shivers with fear, and there seems to be shadows of ghosts shaking in the corner of the wall."<sup>3</sup> We can imagine that in Cao Yu's childhood, he listened to Duan Ma's tragic experience of her family in the dark night, which caused a chilling fear. He then covered his head and hid in the quilt, listening. Maybe it was on the back hill of Xuanhua that the terror impression of the huge divine tree evaporates, which is all inconceivable. These often result in the bitter pursuit and interrogation of the unknown. Why is there such a cruel ending in *Thunderstorm*? Why do people have so many impulsive "disputes"? He thought hard: "there may be a master behind this struggle. The Hebrew prophets called this master 'God' and the Greek dramatists called it 'fate'. Modern people have abandoned these confusing ideas and called it 'the laws of nature'. I can never give it a proper name, nor can I describe its true appearance because it's too big and complicated. What my emotions force me to

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1 Michael Bell. *Modernism Metaphysics, Modernism*. Liaoning Education Press, 2002, p.26.

2 Michael Levinson. *Modernism in Drama, Modernism*. Liaoning Education Press, 2002, p.189.

3 Cao Yu. *Thunderstorm*-Preface, Cultural Life Press, 1936, pp.4-5.



show is just my vision of the universe." <sup>1</sup>

In *Thunderstorm*, a series of fears are shown, first of all, "the fear of incest". In the first act, people are trapped in the imagination of this fear. Cao Yu makes full use of this "sense of terror". In Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, incest and murder are regarded as "two totem taboos". Freud thinks that incest makes people feel terrified, and some even have so-called "incest phobia".

The symbols in Cao Yu's plays have transcended the meaning of general techniques and the category of general realism. They have become an integral part of his modernist drama aesthetics. The reason why the aesthetic form of modernism transcends realism is that it embodies a thought. However, as Pound said, "a thought has little value once it leaves the form of thought that accepts it". <sup>2</sup>

Cao Yu's plays, *Thunderstorm*, *Sunrise*, *The Wilderness* and *Peking Man* seem to be realistic on the surface, but the symbolic use of expressionism is inherently structural and systematic. In *Thunderstorm*, "thunderstorm" has rich symbolic meanings: it symbolizes "the cruelty of the universe", and also the power to destroy the sinful world and the evil system. Thunderstorm is both the atmosphere of the whole drama and the rhythm of the plot. It is also a symbol of the characters' natures and destiny. Thunderstorm is a contradiction between two extremes—either love or hate, or hate or love. Everything is a symbol of extremes. Characters with such natures could be Fan Yi, Lu Dahai, and even Zhou Ping. Thunderstorm is a symbol of poetry for people, so Cao Yu said that he was writing a poem when he wrote *Thunderstorm*. "Thunderstorm is a temptation to me." "Writing *Thunderstorm* is an urgent emotional need. It is an emotional longing as well as a representation of a nameless fear." <sup>3</sup> *Thunderstorm* is emotional, poetic and expressive. In *The Wilderness*, the lush wilderness is full of wild power, and the symbolic colours also act as a foil to the long and horrible nightmare with expressionist aesthetic characteristics.

*Sunrise* seems to be realistic, but is in fact more like a poem. Its drama situation was highlighted in the bloodstained but glittering phenomenon. However, the universal ethics of human beings and the axiom of eternal justice is reflected behind the phenomenon, so it has aesthetic modernity. According to John Gasner, a researcher of modern art, "modern playwrights try to make the two possible realms of reality and poetry reach the acme of beauty, or try to make the two completely consistent or overlapping with each other". <sup>4</sup> Cao Yu turns his great enthusiasm into the soul of

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1 Ibid., pp.5-6.

2 Ezra Pound. *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T.S. Eliot London:Faber, 1954, p. 341.

3 Cao Yu. *Thunderstorm*-Preface. Cultural Life Press, 1936, p.5.

4 *Introduction to Foreign Modern Playwrights' Discussion on Plays*. China Social Sciences Press, 1982.

poetry, melts it into the atmosphere of the drama, condenses it in the blood of the character, and turns it into music of the character's soul. In *Sunrise*, what Cao Yu wants to explore is a sinful world, even a forbidden world. Be it Chen Bailu's luxurious living room or the inferior brothel where Cui Xi is located, Cao Yu's artistic thinking has become a place for his spiritual adventure. Like Baudelaire, he found "a heart of gold" in the filth and found out that "horror shines amidst the gorgeous jewellery". More philosophically, Cao Yu found the tragedy of life tossing, falling and indulging in the modern material world. In the play, Chen Bailu chants this verse repeatedly: "the sun rises, the darkness stays behind, but the sun is not ours, we are going to sleep." This is a paradox of life, a paradox of existence, and a paradox of modernity. Such a poetic discovery alone transcends the aesthetic norms that can be expressed by realism in a general sense.

In Cao Yu's plays, symbolism is his artistic discovery, and the world is thus discovered by the symbol. The symbol and the symbolized, or symbolic metaphor, is not a single reference, but a rich implication, which shows the artistic imagination and power that "reproduction art" does not possess. Therefore, there are endless discussions about Cao Yu, endless staging of Cao Yu's plays, which have vast, profound, and lasting artistic charm.

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# Classical Drama *Thunderstorm*, Being Reinterpreted

ZHU DONGLIN

**ABSTRACT** The adaptation of *Thunderstorm* into Suzhou Pingtan paid great attention to express its original spirit, but abandoned the class struggle and the vulgar sociology of the past researches. It showed the brilliance of human nature and the theme of fate detention of the original work.

**KEY WORDS** *Thunderstorm*, drama, adaptation, Pingtan

## I

In 2010, I cooperated with Suzhou Pingtan Troupe to adapt the drama *Thunderstorm* into a Suzhou Pingtan work (a mid-length script).

It was not an easy job to adapt the classical drama *Thunderstorm* into the Chinese folk-art form Suzhou Pingtan. After the birth of this classical masterpiece of Mr. Cao Yu in 1934, creative adaptations were very rare among those attempts by movie, Xiqu(Jingju, Huju, Yueju, Huangmeixi, etc.), Western Opera, dance drama, etc.. It was only a kind of transplanting by changing the drama scenes and lines into Xiqu. But the spirit of the original work was not embodied. Pingtan is a popular and common art. It is obviously contrary to the spirit of the classical work to make *Thunderstorm* popularized and recreational. The TV drama version of *Thunderstorm* was an abortive attempt in this aspect.

The key point to measure success in adapting *Thunderstorm* lies in whether it grasps the theme and the complexity of the characters' inner hearts or not.

Our adaptation work started from the reinterpretation of *Thunderstorm*, especially its original spirit. This is a family tragedy without parallel from ancient times to the present. The play focuses on two stage backgrounds (the lobby of the Zhou family; the home of the Lu family) within one day. It explores the tragedy of human nature through the historically complex disputes among members in and out of the Zhou family.

There are three important conflicts or dramatic conflict lines in drama *Thunderstorm*: the conflict between Zhou Puyuan and Mei Shiping, due to Mei's returning back to the Zhou house and unveiling the tragedy which has been covered for 30 years; the conflict between Zhou Puyuan and Fanyi—Zhou's feudal autocracy has caused Fanyi's long-term suppressed feelings and pains; the fierce emotional entanglement between Fanyi and Zhou Ping—Fanyi keeps a grip on Zhou Ping, who has fallen in love with Sifeng and wants to flee to faraway places.

During the 80 years after the birth of *Thunderstorm*, the interpretations and understandings of its profound complexity, theme and major conflicts have been changing all the time, which has been influenced by the trend of the prevalent contemporary thoughts of the times. In the 1950s and 1960s, Chinese society emphasized class analysis and struggle, therefore, the study on *Thunderstorm* gave prominence to the conflict between Zhou Puyuan and Lu Ma (namely, Mei Shiping). However, this conflict could not connect the conflict between Zhou Puyuan and Fanyi and that between Fanyi and Zhou Ping, because these conflicts are not the class struggles. There is no dramatic action on the stage about Zhou Puyuan and Mei Shiping, either, because their story is the antecedent of the play, only for pushing the dramatic development. Major actions of Shiping and Zhou Puyuan are finished in Act two. The climaxes of Act one, three and four are not about this conflict.

In the 1980s and 1990s anti-feudalism was the theme of the times. People considered the conflict between Fanyi and Zhou Puyuan was the major one and pointed out four rounds of their conflicts throughout the whole play. This idea had its root in Mr. Qian Gurong's paper "On Characters of *Thunderstorm*" published in 1962. However, the major conflict between Fanyi and Zhou Puyuan breaks out in Act one. In Act two and three (Zhou Puyuan urges Fanyi to see a doctor; Fanyi returns from outside), they just have short contact. In Act four, Fanyi calls out Zhou Puyuan, not for fighting against him but against Zhou Ping. Even the conflict of Zhu Puyuan forcing Fanyi to take the medicine conceals more fierce spiritual conflict between Fanyi and Zhou Ping.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Qian Gurong. On Characters of *Thunderstorm*, *Literary Review*. 1962, No. 1.

The individualism of the drama conception and the complexity of the drama structure lie in that the play reflects and pushes the conflict between Fanyi and Zhou Puyuan through the dispute between Fanyi and Zhou Ping. This dispute line also connects the above mentioned other two conflict lines. In the drama structure, the playwright takes the dispute between Fanyi and Zhou Ping as the center to organize the whole story, and develop and arouse all the dramatic conflicts. In the play, the relationship between Fanyi and Zhou Puyuan has been fossilized. Fanyi falls in love with Zhou Ping due to the indifferent and cold family relationship. She now, like hell, is keeping a grip on Zhou Ping, who wants to abandon her, and causes a series of disputes. She does this for the desire of her soul, but not for fighting against Zhou Puyuan. There are seven rounds of frontal conflicts between Fanyi and Zhou Ping in total. At last, Fanyi calls out Zhou Puyuan and the play reaches its climax. This is not for fighting against Zhou Puyuan, but for stopping Zhou Ping and Sifeng. An outstanding drama cannot be applied and understood with common drama theories mechanically. In *Thunderstorm*, Zhou Puyuan is in the center of the several groups of relationship. However, the conflict between Fanyi and Zhou Ping is the major dramatic conflict according to the plot and structure. Fanyi is the very "Thunder-stormy" person.

That is why we have decided the main line of the Suzhou Pingtan version of *Thunderstorm* is the conflict between Fanyi and Zhou Ping, and Fanyi is the leading role.

A mid-length Pingtan lasts two hours. It is impossible to copy a four-hour classical



■ *Thunderstorm*, 1989

drama onto the Pingtan stage directly. We could only pick some typical parts from the conflict lines. Therefore, we took six segments out of more than 50 dramatic scenes in the whole play, focusing on depicting the conflict between Fanyi and Zhou Ping. The script consists of three acts: Act one, "A Storm is coming". Fanyi retains Zhou Ping with affection after being forced to take the medicine. Act two, "Prying at a Dirty Night". Fanyi follows Zhou Ping and spies upon Zhou Ping and SiFeng, outside the window. Act three, "Violent Storm and Frightening Thunder". Fanyi bursts out in despair.

The climax in Act one is forcing Fanyi to take the medicine. On the drama stage, Zhou Puyuan compels Fanyi ceaselessly. After three times of compelling, he pushes Zhou Ping to the foreground: "Kneel down. Urge your mother to take the medicine!" In this act, the sharpest conflict lies in the conflict between Fanyi and Zhou Ping, but not between Zhou Puyuan and Fanyi. For Fanyi, it is unbearable to see Zhou Ping kneeling down, which means his obedience to his father and betrayal of his promise. The stage prompts: "Ping looks at Fanyi and Chong; Fanyi has tears all over her face; Fanyi stares at Ping ..." On the drama stage where it depends on the actors' lines, Fanyi and Zhou Ping cannot speak with words to show their seething hearts. The stage focuses on Zhou Puyuan and Fanyi, so the actors of Zhou Ping could seldom give appealing performance for this part. In this way, the hidden conflict, which is more important, is always ignored on the drama stage. Suzhou Pingtan is exquisite and lyric, and good at expatiating and singing slowly the plot and portraying the inner feelings of characters. In the first act of Pingtan *Thunderstorm*, after a brief introduction of Zhou Puyuan forcing Zhou Ping to urge Fanyi to take the medicine, it immediately shifts to eye contact between Fanyi and Zhou Ping and tells audience their inner dialogues with three rounds of singing.

In phase one, Fanyi begs Zhou Ping, but Zhou Ping is evasive because he is so scared under his father's despotic power.

Fanyi (sing): Fix my eyes on him, trying to peep into his heart.

Zhou Ping (sing): Knit my brows, disturbingly, being hard to raise my head. Father urges me, again and again. Could it be possible that he has known the secret?

Fanyi (sing): Zhou Ping. The Zhou family, like a cage, suffocates me. Your father, like Yama, scares me. Hope you, a man, straightens your back, take the blame courageously, and help out me.

Zhou Ping (sing): Fanyi. I know all your pains.

But my father, with a bowl of medicine that hides intrigues, might have seen through everything and been ready to rectify family rules. Disobeying father's order may release any clue and bring trouble soon.

In phase two, Fanyi impels Zhou Ping and makes him become sympathized after hesitation. He decides to open his mouth to support her.

Fanyi: No, I am not your mother. You said it three years ago.

(Sing) You pushed over the high wall, beyond the limit. Your tenderness warmed my bosom.

True love suffers unevenness on the secular way, you said.

But as long as we have mutual affinity, hand in hand, you would bear the turbid waves and strong wind.

Zhou Ping (sing): How absurd I was! I have so many regrets besides shame. It's painful to think of the past. Her unreasoning passion to me has never been changed. I am the one in the wrong, who intends to abandon her. I should keep her love in mind and help her out.

(Speak) Look at Fanyi's begging eyes. I ought to support her in front of my father today.

So, Zhou Ping turns back: Father!

Zhou Puyuan: Kneel down!

Zhou Ping is trembling all over! It seems like a dead end.

In phase three, Zhou Ping finally Kneel down.

Fanyi (speak) Fanyi's heart is closing little by little, when seeing him coming close.

Fanyi (sing): Please never call me "mother"!

Zhou Ping (sing): Father's authority —

Fanyi (sing): Please straighten your back, and don't kneel down!

Zhou Ping (sing): and father's order —

Fanyi (sing): I beg you! Please! Please!

Zhou Ping (sing): put me in an awkward situation.

Zhou Ping (sing): Fanyi, It is not difficult to take the medicine.

But the sky might fall if the disgraceful affair was exposed.

Make concession to keep in peace.

Please accept my begging on bended knees.

The Pingtan version of *Thunderstorm* focused on expressing and interpreting the original spirit and the inner spirit of the characters, because we believe that respecting the original work does not mean to copy it, but to explore deeply the connotation on the basis of its major plots.



## II

Many actresses have taken on the challenge to play this unique tragic female role “Fanyi”, a soul with strong affection intertwined with love and hate. It has become an artistic goal for them to portray Fanyi successfully on the stage.

Since *Thunderstorm* was born in 1934, numerous troupes have transplanted it and various performers have poured in their hearts and souls to portray Fanyi on the stage. For instance, Zhao Huishen, an actress in the Travel Drama Troupe of China, performed the depressed role of Fanyi with a gloomy and low voice from beginning to end. Her unique performance was worthy to ponder over. In the 1960s, Huju artist Ding Shi'e also played the role of Fanyi. She was very familiar with this kind of women in Chinese feudal families. Her singing and speaking in the Huju was soft and gloomy. She successfully portrayed an agonizing stage image, which was rare among those adaptation attempts.

The classical drama version of *Thunderstorm* of Beijing People's Art Theatre stressed the theme of anti-feudalism and anti-autocracy. From the 1950s to 1980s, the old generation performers Lv En and Xie Yanning set the blueprint of the Fanyi image on the stage: portraying her agony with a revolting exuberance. Thereafter, although the second and third generation performers decreased the belligerence of the character, they still portrayed Fanyi in this performing structure. In the Shanghai star version of *Thunderstorm*, which was directed by Chen Xinyi, Pan Hong portrayed Fanyi with deep inner experience, incisively and vividly. This Fanyi burst out in a hysterical way in pain and despair. Her performance could be considered the comprehensive expression and culmination on the stage of Beijing People's Art Theatre.

It is no surprise therefore that in the Pingtan interpretation of the work, Fanyi is the primary vehicle for the emotional drama, portraying and reflecting the human soul.

The stage image of Fanyi has always been set as a tragic female who resists and takes revenge on Zhou Puyuan's autocracy, and is in constant conflict with Zhou Ping, blaming him for his betrayal. Since the 1950s, on the drama stage, Fanyi had been created as the image of a tragic female who resisted against and burst out in despair. Her gloom and hysteria was played up in the fixed pattern. The theoretical support for this image pattern was emphasizing the strong anti-feudalism theme and image. From 1937 when Zhou Yang published a long paper “On *Thunderstorm* and *Sunrise*”<sup>1</sup> to argue in favor of *Thunderstorm* and therefore set the tune of the “anti-feudal family

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1 Zhou Yang. On *Thunderstorm* and *Sunrise* — Critic on Mr. Huang Gangzhi's Critic, *Bright*. Vol 2, No. 8, 1937.



■ *Thunderstorm*, 2006

theme", to when Chinese-American Doctor Liu Shaoming considered Fanyi as "Nera of China" who "raised vicious flag for modern Chinese women"<sup>1</sup> in his doctoral thesis "Caoyu: Western Literature Influences on *Thunderstorm*", it was reasonable to interpret the drama in this way in certain historic phase after its birth.

After the founding of People's Republic of China, the political and cultural environment strengthened the anti-feudalism of the theme of *Thunderstorm* and the Fanyi image. The relationship between Zhou Puyuan and Mei Shiping (as well as Lu Dahai) was intensified and considered as class oppression. The conflict between Zhou Puyuan and Fanyi was politicalized as anti-feudal struggle. Fanyi was fighting against Zhou Puyuan's autocracy in this feudal family. Zhou Ping was considered a playboy of the capitalist class. Both the classical and patterned performance of Beijing People's Art Theatre after 1954 and other Chinese drama versions, at home and abroad (including Hong Kong and Singapore troupes), all interpreted and performed *Thunderstorm* and Fanyi in this way. In recent years, although the political connotation has gradually become weaker than before because Director Xia Chun has been modifying it constantly and the political and class struggle colors are fading, the Fanyi image has been fixed in the pattern: resisting and fighting constantly on the stage and finally bursting out.

In 1978 I studied Cao Yu's dramas in my postgraduate thesis in Nanjing University.

1 Liu Shaoming. *Western Literature Influences on Thunderstorm, Novel and Drama*. Taipei Hongfan Bookstore, February, 1977, p.134.

From then on, I have been continuously reading this classical work. I was fortunate to be hired as a consultant to adapt *Thunderstorm* into a Suzhou Pingtan work. I asked actors, actresses and playwrights to read the original work and *Thunderstorm*-Preface written in 1936 again. I believed that we ought to extract the originality from repeated readings. The two years' Pingtan version adaptation process, starting from June, 2008, was a process of reinterpretation to me and the cast and crew.

It is the richness of *Thunderstorm*'s inner connotation and the image chaos of Cao Yu's creative thinking that make it adaptive and acceptable to various kinds of theoretical thinking. The "chaos", but not the definite fixity of social and political theoretical thinking, is the very richness. Since *Thunderstorm* was born 80 years ago, it has been interpreted under various kinds of thinking: class struggle, anti-feudalism, humanity, realism, symbolism, super realism, and the like. But the account of the playwright's own words is always the most important:

"Obviously, I had no consciousness to rectify, satirize or attack anything. Maybe when I wrote the end part, it seemed that there was a passion surging up violently and pushing me forward. I was giving vent to my anger and slandering the Chinese families and society. However, at the beginning when I first had a vague image of *Thunderstorm*, what interested me was only one or two segments of the plot, several characters and a kind of complex but primitive feeling."<sup>1</sup>

In the play, Fanyi conflicts with Zhou Puyuan and Zhou Ping, and burst out in a hysterical way. What is her motive power?

Fanyi keeps a grip on Zhou Ping, "I could not bear the Zhou family anymore!" It was said that she was oppressed by the feudal head of the Zhou family, Zhou Puyuan. But Zhou, as the head of the family, has a strong sense of responsibility. Why does he oppress his wife?

In the first version of *Thunderstorm* published by Culture and Life Press in 1936, Fanyi had a long monologue in the climax of the fourth act. She told the audience the reason. I call it Fanyi's "self-declaration":

Fanyi (raising her voice): Your mother died years ago. She was crushed and smothered by your father. Now I am not your mother. She is a woman coming back to life because of seeing Zhou Ping. (At all hazards.) She is also a woman who needs a man to love her and wants to be real and alive!

(Wiping her eyes, in an anguished voice.) How many years have I put

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1 Caoyu. *Thunderstorm* · Preface, Culture and Life Press, 1936.

up with this? In this dead place, the house like a prison, I have been married to a hateful tyrant for 18 years! But my heart has not been dead yet. Your father have made me give birth to Chong, but my heart, my body is still my own. (Pointing at Zhou Ping) He is the only one that ever possessed the whole me. But now he doesn't want me, he doesn't want me anymore!

The popular versions of *Thunderstorm* in *Selected Works of Cao Yu* published by People's Literature Press in 1961 and 1978 were both revised ones. In the performances of Beijing People's Art Theatre and other drama troupes, the above core line (in bold) of Fanyi's self-declaration had been deleted, including the following sentences:

She is a woman coming back to life because of seeing Zhou Ping. (At all hazards.) She is also a woman who needs a man to love her and wants to be real and alive!

Without the deleted lines, Fanyi became an inexplicable and hysterical woman. She was just fighting against the feudal family head, Zhou Puyuan, and fighting for revealing and keeping a grip on Zhou Ping.

Actually, in the 1936 version, Cao Yu wrote a long character introduction of Fanyi to describe the innermost being of this dramatis personae. Some lines should be paid attention to:

... She is to be loved, and should be loved. After all, she is a woman, just like all other young woman. She will love you like a dog who has been hungry for three days and now is biting its favorite bone. She also will hate you like a cur yapping in a frenzy, oh no, silently and savagely eating you.

(In *Selected Works of Cao Yu* of the 1961 and 1978 versions, the above description were revised to: She loves like a fire and hates like a fire too, and will burn you all.)

Moreover, in the first version, when Fanyi appears on the stage in the first act, the relationship among Fanyi, Zhou Puyuan and Zhou Ping is very clear: 1. The master is a vegetarian and chants scriptures every day. "He dislikes woman." He sleeps in the study alone. The madam hasn't got downstairs for two weeks. 2. This time, the master came home two days ago, but he hasn't met his wife. He sleeps in the study downstairs and the madam stays upstairs all day. 3. Zhou Puyuan keeps the old furniture, according to Act two, and he has been loving and remembering Mei Shiping, but not Fanyi, for thirty years!

We can learn from the above that: Fanyi married Zhou Puyuan when she was young.



■ *Thunderstorm*, 2010

But she never got Zhou's love. The marriage was also not consummated. In despair and thirst of love and sex, she fell in love with young Zhou Ping. This thirst, capture and struggle for love and sex pushes forward the metamorphosis of the character relationship and the tragedy. Finally, the "cruelty and coldness of the struggle in the universe", borne in Cao Yu's mind constantly, burst out.<sup>1</sup>

There was a significant statement by Cao Yu in *Thunderstorm*·Preface. It was ignored due to its obscurity. It told us what "my ineffable longing for various mysterious things in the universe, which were fermented from the innate feelings of *Thunderstorm*" was. In fact, the playwright stated clearly:

The human beings are pathetic animals, puffing up with pride, as if we are here to dominate our fate, but always the ones to be dominated. Being teased by ourselves — affectively or in understanding, or by an unknowable power — by chance or environmentally; living around narrow love and being well wadded with conceit; roaming in a free universe in our own conceit — human beings, the intelligence one of the universe, are doing stupid things, aren't we?

They quarrel endlessly and blindly, like loaches writhing insensibly in a fire pit of emotions. They try their best to save themselves. Not realizing that millions of bottomless abysses are opening mouths in front of

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1 Caoyu. *Thunderstorm* · Preface, Culture and Life Press, 1936.

them. They are like exhausted horses falling down into a quagmire. The more they struggle, the deeper that fall into the quagmire of the death. Zhou Ping repents of the "past sin" by holding Sifeng firmly and trying to wash himself by this new inspiration. However, he doesn't know that he is committing a more horrible sin. And this road is leading to death. Fanyi is the most touching and pitiful woman. She doesn't repent, like a stubborn horse. She is setting foot on the old and difficult road without hesitation by holding Zhou Ping firmly. She wants to save herself by picking up the broken dreams. But this road is leading to the death, either. In *Thunderstorm*, the universe is like a cruel well. Anyone who falls into it could not escape from this dark pit, no matter how he or she is wailing.

The above statement has revealed Fanyi's deep-lying inner motive of her actions. Zhou Puyuan's autocracy has caught her in a dilemma — a marriage without love and sex. "I can never bear the Zhou family anymore...But my heart, my body is still my own." She accepts the unscrupulous love of Zhou Ping. But Zhou Ping is going to leave with another woman. In the play, the conflicts between Fanyi and Zhou Ping are constant, with one climax following another. But she is not quarreling for the quarrel itself or fighting for the fight itself. She cares for Zhou Ping too much. She cannot lose him. Losing him means losing the last hope for her life. She cries to Zhou Ping, "You know, I am so bitter, not having you in front of me." Of course, Zhou Ping who is so weak could not accept Fanyi's supernatural love. Fanyi's soul call is not echoed with her soul mate. Zhou Ping is not the man worthy of her love. A rebelling and strong soul is needed to accept Fanyi's love. It is obvious that Zhou Ping does not have such a soul. But under such a situation, Fanyi could only meet such a kind of lover.

We soon get a common view: abandon the class struggle and the vulgar sociology of the past researches and performances, and instead pay attention to the brilliance of human nature in the original drama *Thunderstorm*. The drama master, with compassion, let a group of people whose human nature was distorted by the times search painfully at a thunderstorm night. Thirty years of love, hate, lust and tears in the Zhou family caused a grieving tragedy. All the people were entangled by the unknowable fate. Extreme pains and fierce lust collided in a day intensively. The kind, sincere, tender and repentant souls were torn into pieces repeatedly. The final tragedy is inevitable.

The Pingtan version of *Thunderstorm* portrays a "Fanyi" who is struggling for love, rather than against the feudalist constraints of her time. A female fighting and quarreling on the stage is not easy to acquire the tragic compassion from the audience. Her struggle is just the surface. The pain lies in her heart. Her hysteria has basis in her loveless, sexless marriage. Suzhou Pingtan is good at portraying characters' inner emotions. It is exquisite in expressing humanization. In conclusion,

the Pingtan version of *Thunderstorm* portrays a woman who is oppressed but struggling for a long time and longs for love and care.

In Act three, there is an aria by Fanyi, facing everyone, which is the core of the Pingtan version of *Thunderstorm* to portray the Fanyi image. It is also our interpretation of the Fanyi image. Just like the monologue in the fourth act of the original work, it is Fanyi's declaration. This "Fanyi's song" in the Pingtan version dominates the whole play. Facing everyone, Fanyi takes out the love pledge—a round fan, and states her heart candidly, "Mother and son fell in love three years ago. One night of love is worth a thousand years."

This aria consists of three layers. Firstly, Fanyi tells about the marriage without sex and love with Zhou Puyuan and her pains in the Zhou family. The following is our key concern about the deep motive of the conflicts between Fanyi and Zhou Puyuan and the relationship between Fanyi and Zhou Ping:

Fanyi (sings): Puyuan, Fanyi is not a bird in your cage. She is a woman longing for tender affection.

I have been counting flying birds in the days, watching the moon at nights, and sleeping in a cold quilt lonely for so many years.

Secondly, she tells about the relationship with Zhou Ping, "The greatest sorrow is apathy. Ping'er, like water, saved me the withered lotus." "Today I have no regrets. I chuckle to myself for the love is coming to light." "Raise your head and look at me. Tell me again the oath you have sworn solemnly years ago." Thirdly, she faces Zhou Chong, "I have a guilty conscience over you; I am sorry to you, Chong'er! I am so sorry! I have to say it a million times. "

This aria is vivid and direct, clear in layers, profound in interpretation, and strong in emotions, with blood and tears in words. It is the punchline of the Pingtan version *Thunderstorm*. The actress Sheng Xiaoyun devotes herself deeply and has comprehended Fanyi's heart, fusing herself and the character into one during the performance. The caged and withered soul bursts out bright sparkles in a vast search and fights like a trapped beast. In the performance, the actress shortens the intermediate music, holds her voice with affection and conveys the feelings by voice. She sings out Fanyi's 18-year loneliness and pains, longing and pursuit, with no alternatives and no regrets but a desperate rebellion.



# Wenmingxi (Civilized Theatre) —An Early Form of Modern Chinese Drama

ZHONG JUNFANG

Wenmingxi or “Civilized Theatre”, an early form of Chinese drama during the end of 19th century and the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century, witnessed the historical transformation of Chinese drama from its classical to modern form. This paper tries to introduce the traditional elements of Wenmingxi.

## I. Wenmingxi's Inheritance of the Xiqu (Chinese Opera) Themes

Most of the civilized plays were based on contemporaneous life and reflected the changes of current events. However, some might be adapted from foreign plays, whilst others might be recreated in classical Chinese.

In order to attract the audience into the theatre, the Xiqu entered the vision of some artists who were engaged in modern drama, especially in Shanghai. As a result, a series of works were produced, adapted from Shanghai-style Jingju, such as *Monument of Blood and Tears*, *The Story of the West Chamber*, *A Handful of Snow*, etc.

In addition, the traditional Xiqu plays reflecting marriage and family life were also favoured by the Wenmingxi artists. *Li Sanniang*, *Pearl Tower*, and the like, were adapted from Jingju. In order to attract female audience members, a large number of romantic plays from legends were also adapted into Wenmingxi plays and performed in the theatres. However, this kind of Wenmingxi play, adapted entirely from Xiqu, did

not make up the majority of the works.

## II. Xiqu Elements in Wenmingxi's Plot Outline

The writers of Wenmingxi were mainly composed of literati, popular novelists and performers. Elegant and elitist plays, written or translated by literati, were rarely copied, while those composed by popular novelists and dramatists occupied the stages most of the time. The more readable the script was, the less likely it would be copied. On the contrary, those *Mubiao* plays (plays only with a plot outline but without a script), with rough and simple scenes and setting introduction, had a high rate of performance on the stage.<sup>1</sup>

The plot structure of the Wenmingxi could roughly be divided into titles, scenes, characters in each scene, plot outline, actors' comparison table, etc. There were few strict plays and standard lines, and the performance was not strictly divided into separate scenes. There were many interludes between scenes. Unfortunately, most of the plot outlines have not been preserved. According to the six plot outlines of "Minming Society" in the library of Central Academy of Drama, the author has found that in some plays there are similar elements to Xiqu.

For example, the title of each act was mainly composed of two words and highly summarized the plot. In addition, plays like *Life-long Regret* by Chen Dabei, still retained some forms of Xiqu, such as the recital of four lines of verse and self-introduction recited by a character when he makes his first appearance on the stage. However, there were exceptions. The Spring Willow Society's plays had more detailed titles and tended to be colloquial. Besides the plot outlines, there were translated scripts, compiled scripts, scripts in classical Chinese, scripts for new plays mixed reciting and singing, and intangible scripts. Sometimes the writer added Kejie (actions, expressions and stage effects in Xiqu plays) as stage prompts.<sup>2</sup>

## III. The Role System in Wenmingxi

### (1) Continuation of Hangdang

Drama centres on dialogue and emphasizes realism in artistic features. However, China's early drama did not learn from Europe and America, but from Japan's new

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<sup>1</sup> Wang Fengxia. *On Civilized Drama*. Guangdong Higher Education Press, July, 2011, p. 347.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* P. 355.



drama. The Japanese new plays retained the role system and had natural similarities with the Xiqu.

In general, there was no director for Wenmingxi, so some plays unconsciously inherited the performance system of "role system". In *Historical Materials of Early Professional Drama* written by Zhu Shuangyun, roles were roughly divided into five categories: Lao Sheng (old man), Xiao Sheng (young man), Dan (female role) and Huaji (buffoon), according to actors' performing skills.

In *New Drama History*, roles were divided in a more detailed way. Sheng had eight schools, including fierce, solemn, and shabby, etc. Dan had six schools, including plaintive, forthright, pungent, etc. The division of Hangdang in the traditional Xiqu could be traced back to Zaju in the Song Dynasty. Each Hangdang in the performance carried a fixed performance task, which was indispensable in a complete and standardized performance process.

Wenmingxi was not so. Although the role system had been preserved to some extent, the actors did not receive strict professional training, so they were more casual and exaggerated in the actual performance, lacking artistry. According to the records, Ge Jiandan, Yanlunzhengsheng (speech male roles good at expressing opinions in the performance), was very popular, for he "witnesses the darkness and the injustice of the society and calls loudly in every play. When he gets to the heart of the matter, he will give various examples far and near, pouring out words in a steady flow, even in a tearful voice."

Another Yanlunzhengsheng Wang Wukong was "born with chivalrous spirit, not bothering about trifling matters. Therefore, most of his characters are men of chivalry." Thus, it can be seen that Wenmingxi actors did not prioritize the plot, nor did they deal with the character of the roles, but were instead focused on being who they were, integrating personal charm with the characters. Therefore, the classification of roles in Wenmingxi by Zhu Shuangyun and others mainly based on the actor's personality and temperament, but not on the roles. This is a big difference between the role system of Wenmingxi and Xiqu.

## (2) Retainment of the Nandan (Male Dan)

According to the realism principle of European and American drama, roles are mostly played by actors with similar appearance and temperament. Male actors play male roles, while female actors play female roles, which seems to be the iron rule. However, just as the Japanese new drama retained the female form of Kabuki, the Nandan from the Xiqu was also active on the stage of Wenmingxi.

Its representative actors were Li Shutong, Ouyang Yuqian, and other members of the Spring Willow Society. Most of them had studied abroad in Japan, with a high level of cultural literacy, and had watched a large number of new plays. Compared with the traditional literati, they had no prejudice towards acting and were even more devout. Li Shutong bought special clothes and shaved his beard to play the role of a Camellia girl. Ouyang Yuqian and Mei Lanfang, in parallel, were called "Southern Ou and Northern Mei" by virtue of their superb acting skills. Therefore, it can be concluded that there were many Nandan actors with excellent acting skills on the stage of Wenmingxi.

Other Wenmingxi actors, who had oversea educational backgrounds, "more or less, consciously or unconsciously, absorb the performance methods of old plays, so that it is easier for the audience to feel cordial and fascinating." They inherited the performance concept of "not for amusing but for touching the audience's hearts" from Xiqu which always made the audience tearful. "None of those, who have hot blood, have not shed tears in watching the tragedies."<sup>1</sup>

However, with the ban policy of female artists being broken in Shanghai, female artists appeared on the stage in 1920s. The performing system of Nandan, inconsistent with modern drama, was swept into the dust of history.

## IV. Yanlun (Speech) and Huaji (Farce): similar performance effects in Xiqu

As most Wenmingxi used the plot outline system, it left a great space for the actors to perform. The actors could jump out of the drama and communicate with the audience. There were two types of civilized actors who were familiar with this way of performing: actors with pan-political tendencies, and burlesque actors driven by commercial profits.

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<sup>1</sup> Ouyang Yuqian. *Recalling the Spring Willows Society*. P. 177.

The Evolution Troupe, an important one of early Wenmingxi, advocated civilizing the public, and its repertoire gradually became the means to attract the audience to enter the theatre and listen to them. In the way of performance, Yanlunlaosheng often ignored the realistic style, even the script. When performing, the actors made remarks irrelevant to the plot, so as to adjust the atmosphere, enhance the comedy effect of the drama, and become one with the audience. This obviously has inherited the comedy tradition of Chinese classical drama that originated from the Canjunxi (a traditional comic performance to satirize a political or social phenomenon, in the Tang and Song Dynasties), which is quite different from the concept of modern realistic drama in Europe. <sup>1</sup>

Burlesque roles driven by commercial profits appeared around 1914. Under the stimulation of market and box office, the content of drama changed from pan-politicization to pan-entertainment. The appearance of burlesque roles was similar to Chou (the Hangdang plays burlesque characters) in Xiqu. They "wear hats and *yin-yang* boots. The robe only covers the knee, and the braid is raised to the sky." Eventually, actors even painted the faces and performed with exaggerated actions to win the audience's laughter. But this kind of performance sometimes broke the whole serious atmosphere when it needed the audience's attention, especially in the drama with current affairs as the theme. If it was not used properly, it seemed inappropriate. Although the burlesque factors sometimes had a negative effect on the performance, they have given birth to a new type of play—Huajixi (burlesque comedy). <sup>2</sup>

## V. Conclusion

Why couldn't the Wenmingxi with the name of "New drama" get rid of the influence of Xiqu when this one was in a state of desperate dilapidation?

On the one hand, drama has been endowed with profound educational function at that time. In 1904, Chen Duxiu published *On Xiqu* to clarify that "The Xiqu house is the great school for people, and the Xiqu performers are great teachers for people". In order to attract more audiences into the theatre, the creators must consider the interest of the audience of Xiqu. On the other hand, a new art style cannot be achieved overnight. In the process of hard exploration, there would always be some traces of old art styles.

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1 Chen Baichen, Dong Jian, (Chief editors), *The Draft of Modern Chinese Theatre History*. China Theatre Press, 1989, p.27.

2 Jianyun. Review of *New plays*, Flourishing Magazine. No.5, 1914.

Therefore, the creators inevitably drew lessons from the artistic style of Xiqu, thus contributing to the emergence of new Wenmingxi. Although this “civilized theatre” declined rapidly after the revolution of 1911, its appearance has enriched the different ongoing types of drama.

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# An Overview of Chinese Experimental Theatre

SUN YUNFENG

Contemporary Chinese drama is deeply influenced by Western drama, for its emergence and development can be attributed to the two distinct experimental theatre movements in Europe and America. The 100-year development of Chinese drama demonstrated that whenever a crisis occurs, or reformation is called to explore a new direction, the experimental theatre would become unprecedentedly active.

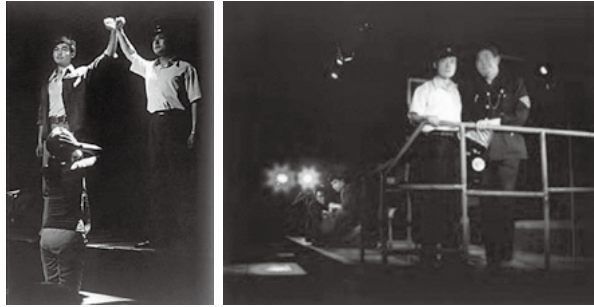
Derived from the “dramatic crisis”, contemporary Chinese experimental theatre did not occur in the 1980s at random. Thanks to the Open-up and Reform policy, China's 1980's witnessed, along with the gush of numerous Chinese versions of western literary and academic classics, the introduction and translation of foreign theatre works, drama theories, and schools. The new schools of theatre included absurd theatre, existential theatre, cruel theatre, and poor theatre, which shocked Chinese theatre artists.

While the tradition of Chinese drama was re-examined by dramatists, the guidance of modern Western drama concepts on art paved the way for the emergence of experimental theatre. Meanwhile, the opening of the economy bolstered the popularity of film and TV in the 1980s, and thus theatre attendance declined in the light of technological forms of entertainment. Faced with this plight, Gao Xingjian proposed that the crisis of losing the audience would not be resolved until “we re-examine and study the living conditions of our theatre art and its own rules.”<sup>1</sup> At the same time, director Lin Zhaohua also explored a way out of the crises by declaring that: “I'm not anti-Stanislawski nor anti-Ibsen. They are masters in drama history, with whom I cannot compete. What I am thinking about is that is there any other way out apart from their paradigms? I want to see some ‘non-Ibsen’ plays”<sup>2</sup>. The social ideology

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1 Gao Xingjian. *Modern Theatre Technique, Essay. No.1*, 1983.

2 Lin Zhaohua. *On the Artistic Design of Absolute Signal, Editorial Crew of Beijing People's Art Theatre*. China Theatre Press, 1985, p. 110.



■ *Absolute Signal*, 1982

and cultural atmosphere in the 1980s influenced the ecology of drama and challenged the perspective of dramatists. Finally, *Absolute Signal* (edited by Gao Xingjian and directed by Lin Zhaohua), which was performed in Beijing in 1982, was regarded as the manifesto of Chinese experimental theatre movements. After that, drama theorists initiated a theoretical discussion on "what is experimental theatre", and made a summary of the drama of Chinese experimental theatre in the 1980s.

The concepts conveyed by experimental theatre that defined the movement were a sense of rebelliousness and the avant-garde. "Rebellion is the most precious character of small theatre art. It subverts tradition, system, and pattern, exploring new space and new means of drama activities; aesthetically, it criticized the unreasonable society and imperfect human nature ferociously; it deprives the idol of divinity, denies authority, disregards and desert hegemony, and disbelieves in eternal drama. Through constant reflecting, surpassing, and reconstructing, the infinite possibilities of expressing the life of drama art are discovered." <sup>1</sup>

Correspondently, *Owl in the House* (written by Zhang Xian, directed by Gu Yi'an) fully illustrated the experimental theatre spirit was put on the stage. Threaded by a female's (Shasha) fantasies about her husband (Kongkong) and her first love (Kangkang), this play dealt with the interrelation between desire, control, family, and freedom. It abandoned the verisimilitude narrative pattern of realistic plays by setting contrasts between old mansion and forest, Kongkong (husband, psychologist) and Kangkang (first love, hunter), day and night, reality and idealism, forging an integrated stage image.<sup>2</sup>

1 Lin Kehuan. Rebellion and Advance—On the Artistic Characteristics of the Experimental Theatre, *Drama Monthly News*. July 1989.

2 Wu Baohe. *China Contemporary Experimental Theatre Drama*. Shanghai Far East Publishing House, 2016, pp.13-14.





■ *Sifan*, 1993

Besides the "anti-traditional" quality of experimental theatre, it has been defined differently by many artists. Lin Zhaohua, director of *Absolute Signal* in 1982, reckoned that experimental theatre varied in accord with different national conditions; thus, while it meant "anti-drama" abroad, the experimental theatre was not so rebellious in China and "anti-drama" was absolutely not his motivation. He believed that the tasks of Chinese experimental theatres can be generated into three aspects: "firstly, its form contributes to the popularization of drama. The experimental theatre embodies the essence of drama, namely the close communication between people"; "secondly, it is an experimental base for some artists. Due to the financial pressure, leaders of grand theatres tend to reject experimental dramas to avoid money-losing once it fails, therefore, the low-cost experimental theatre becomes a place for them to explore"; "thirdly, it facilitates appreciations on Chinese and foreign masterpieces of ancient and modern time. We should perform more classics, and even Xiqu can be adapted. The plays of Shakespeare, Lao She, and Cao Yu can be reinterpreted and updated." <sup>1</sup>

Chinese experimental theatre endured significant evolution, from which obvious tendencies emerged: diversification, secularization, and gamification in form and style. <sup>2</sup>

The 1990s witnessed the debut of *Sifan* (directed by Meng Jinghui), an embodiment of synaesthesia, expressionism, and symbolism, as well as *Lady Leftover* (edited by Le Meiqin, directed by Yu Luosheng), *Atlantic Telephone* (edited by Wang Jianping, directed by Yuan Guoying) which illustrated features of realism by shunning extreme performance. Among those who cherished anti-traditional and anti-mainstream drama

1 Three People's Discussion on Experimental Theatre, *Chinese Theatre*. No.9, 1988.

2 Ding Luonan. *Overall View of Chinese Drama in the Twentieth Century*. Shanghai 100 Publishing House, 2009, pp. 266-270.



■ *Lady Leftover*, 1993

styles, the "gang" drama club led by Meng Jinghui has performed absurd dramas such as *Elevator*, *The Bald Soprano*, *Balcony*, etc. pursuing a "distinctive form and avant-garde consciousness that can tell it apart." Additionally, Lin Zhaohua persevered in creating experimental works. His important works of this period include *Hamlet*, which "deconstructed" the nobleness and solemnity of Shakespeare's original works ruthlessly.

The most representative figure of Chinese independent drama in the 1990s, however, was no other than Mu Sen, who admired the performance and training methods of "poor drama" advocated by Grotovsky. He led the establishment of the "frog" drama club (theatrical workshop), launching *The Chinese Grammar Discussion on "The Other Side"*, *Related to AIDS*, *Zero File*, and other plays which presented "another kind of life with no script, nor storyline, nor fabrication."<sup>1</sup> Compared with these rebellious and antagonistic dramas, more experimental theatres hesitated to go to extremes and lose audiences. Especially in Shanghai, many experimental theatres and drama clubs challenged the traditional model of drama, yet only made partial and limited reforms in the form, valuing drama factors such as "conflict", "plot", "character". For example, Zhang Xian, editor of *The Owl in the House*, created *The Wife from the United States* and *Margin Upstairs*, concocting realistic technique and modern awareness after the 1990s. A lot of experimental theatre creators oriented their style on catering to the realism and the market. This concept was considered as a betrayal of the purpose and essence of the small theatre in the 1980s but was accepted by many artists in the 1990s.

The secularization trend of Chinese experimental theatres was also reflected in many plays, such as *Lady Leftover*, *Mrs. Study-accompany*, *Atlantic Telephone*, *Wife from*

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1 Mou Sen, Written on Drama Program List, *Art World*. No. 3, 1997.

*the United States* etc, presenting the concerns of ordinary citizens in the 1990s, namely "going abroad" and "study abroad". In this type of drama, the playwrights avoided making any ethical or moral judgments and preferred to reveal the subtle emotional changes brought about by the "going abroad tide" that emerged with China's reform and opening up in the 1990s. In addition, plays such as *Emotional Training*, *Hotline*, and *Transiting on the Same Ship*, targeted ordinary worldly life, giving due attention to individual life experience, through which the interpersonal relationships, social structure, and cultural implication were reflected. With secular content, popular form, and realistic technique, this kind of experimental theatre was close to audiences' life and soul.

Gamification was also a feature of Chinese small theatre dramas in the 1990s; "on one hand, it is an inevitable consequence of secularization, in other words, the entertainment function is increasing dominating in this cultural-consumer art, emphasizing participation and leisure both in content and form; on the other hand, it correlates to some new characteristics of the 'postmodern' art."<sup>1</sup> Most of those dramas favoured comedy, tragic comedy, and black humour which went coherent with the tone of the gamified drama. Besides, they tended to resort to funny "plot assembly" and "story collage" to deconstruct meaning and display meaninglessness. For example, Lin Zhaohua's *Chinese Orphan* was a collage of Zaju Zhao's *Orphan*, Voltaire's *Chinese Orphan*, and *Hamlet*, which deconstructed the original works. *Sifan* directed by Meng Jinghui was an assembly of the Italian novel *The Decameron* and the Kunqu *Sifan Shuangxiashan*. Meng's later work, *Let Your Whip Down Woyzeck*, blended Chinese famous folk play with German expressionist plays.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, rapid economic growth has accelerated China's urbanization process and the emergence of the "white-collar workers" has nurtured many young audiences for experiential theatre dramas. In some cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Nanjing, Shenzhen, and Chengdu, experimental theatre attracted more and more young audiences. In 2001, the play *Cuihua, Serve Pickled Cabbage* ushered an era of funny drama by gaining audiences' favour with laughter. In 2005, Xixiaotang introduced the business model to the production of experimental theatre dramas, blurring the boundary between elegance drama and popular culture. In 2007, Leizi Lexiao Factory was established, boasting its series of comedy under the name of "pressure-easing drama". In 2008, Beijing experimental theatre drama topped 148 plays with nearly 2000 performances, and among the 87 plays performed in Shanghai, 70% were experimental drama. By the end of November 2009, according to the statistics issued by the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Culture, there have been more than 260 plays and more than 3000 performances of

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<sup>1</sup> Ding Luonan. *Overall View of Chinese Drama in the Twentieth Century*. Shanghai 100 Publishing House, 2009, p. 270.

experimental theatre dramas.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the past two decades witnessed the grand impact of national or international experimental theatre drama festivals and exhibitions and seminars in China.

It can be stated that the experimental theatre dramas since the new century are derived from those of the 1900s, with the increasing expansion of independent dramas. On one hand, the new left idealistic dramas represented by Zhang Guangtian's *Che Guevara* (2000) stimulated heavy debate in the domestic intellectual arena. On the other hand, working-class dramas, such as those from "the Grassroot Group" and the New Workers Art Troupe focus on the real condition of the lower's living and working circumstance, casting influence on the folk drama. They often perform non-profit performances in the community or other non-theatre environments in the form of collective creation. One of their representative works is *Micro Society* (2009) created by "the Grassroot group". In the play, the actors reveal the powerless survival of the people at the bottom of the social pyramid by resorting to the verbal and non-verbal language of people from different classes. In addition, there are experimental theatre dramas represented by the performances of the Beijing Youth Drama Festival, with diverse expressions of ideas and diverse artistic techniques. Among them, thanks to the influence of European and American physical dramas, domestic companies such as "Santuoqi Opera Company" and "Ling Yunyan" create physical dramas, making the body an important field of exploration.

Overall, Chinese experimental theatre rose up from the "dramatic crisis". After the 1980s, Chinese theatre grafted the Western experimental theatre dramas to deal with the intensified crisis and brave new way to survive and develop. Whether it is the debut of a theatre festival in China in the late 1980s, the pioneering drama in the early 1990s, the experimental transformation of traditional dramas throughout the 1990s, or the dazzling various experimental theatre dramas since the beginning of the new century, they are the Chinese theatres' response to its national condition and the product of Chinese experimental theatre movement.

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The mid-term outcome of the project of History of Chinese Drama in Shanghai Normal University  
307-AC0302-20-005464

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1 Song Baozhen. Experimental Theatre: Flowers, or Bubbles, *Literary News*. No. 8, 2010.

# Analysis of Experimental Theatre Art in China

LI YIGENG

The experimental theatre art, like a star in the field of Chinese stage arts, has drawn a great deal of attention from people inside and outside of the theatre circle since its emergence in China. It employs unique methods of expression, modes of production, and attracts a distinct audience, different from the traditional drama arts. Although it is impossible to separate it from the traditional theatre art, this art form has achieved remarkable accomplishments, and won increasingly high praise in China. Compared with other stage arts, like drama, dance drama, musicals, and other similar forms, it has already obtained the equal status. This article will analyze the history, classic works, and current problems of experimental theatre in China, and put forward some advice and suggestions.

## Experimental Theatre Art in China Emerging as the Times Require

Experimental theatre, originating in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in Europe, saw Western artists explore and alter the possibility of theatre art under the banner of anti-commercial, and even anti-entertainment, pretences.

In China, most scholars consider Director Lin Zhaohua's *Absolute Signal* in 1982 as the beginning of Chinese experimental theatre. In the years that followed, experimental dramas popped up like bamboo shoots after a spring rain. But if we analyze the nature of experimental theatre, we find that in the 1920s when Chinese drama was in its infancy, it already possessed some features of experimental art.

In 1921, the "People's Drama Club", which was initiated by Wang Youyou and the Xia brothers (Xia Yueshan and Xia Yuerun), gave out the slogan of "non-profit, new drama of art".<sup>1</sup> At the same time, Chen Dabei also proposed "Amateur Theatre", and

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1 Tao Peng, Zhu Jiang. Research on the Tendency of Pan-entertainment of Peking Experimental Theatre Art, *Greatwall*. No. 03x, 2014.

claimed that, “only organizing more amateur theatres to explore the art by those who are knowledgeable and do not act for a living, could we have remarkable theatrical art in China at present. Otherwise, there is absolutely no hope.” The above precursors acted as a voice for change in the face of commercialization and entertainment in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. But due to the social unrest, high requirements on amateur theatre performers and limited spread scope, this new art form disappeared with the passing of time.

Since the reform and opening up of China, earth-shaking changes have taken place in Chinese forms of theatre. With the development of various art forms and the emergence of different media platforms, the living space for the theatrical art was squeezed and caused a serious crisis. Both theatres in the main metropolises, and troupes in the mid-sized cities, faced the difficult problem that there was no audience. This situation happened on almost everywhere. People no longer came to watch theatre, but became interested in new media like TV, movies, and the like. Compared with drama, these new forms of media have their own unique advantages, and people were hungry for new things. Then a drama crisis emerged.

The crisis is also good timing to change. Chinese dramatists began to rethink about theatre. In 1982, director Lin Zhaohua from the Beijing People's Art Theatre, put *Absolute Signal*, which was written by Gao Xingjian, on the experimental theatre stage. Due to its rich new techniques in characterization, lighting effects, and space-time changing methods, this play was highly appreciated in the end of 1980s when the traditional theatre forms was occupying the dominant position. From then on, theatre art pioneers turned their eyes to experimental theatre, which began to flourish in China, with small budget, strong experimental means and inclusiveness. It avoided having to rent theatre space and pay for expensive stage effects. The way of expressing stories with creative art forms was warmly welcomed by young students. The upsurge brought audiences back to the theatres, helping relieve the crisis to some extent.

## Representatives of Experimental Theatre Art in China

The creativity featured by experimental theatre art has bred a group of directors with an avant-garde spirit. For instance, Lin Zhaohua from Beijing People's Art Theatre is a director with distinctive characteristics. Lin was born in 1936, and he produced his first experimental theatre works when he was 46. He once said that he had no unique style as a director, but just tried to find out the very style of each play when directing it:

The inherent concepts, theories and formation of drama don't work when I direct a play. I believe in my comprehension and feeling. Things that I like will pop up constantly during the process of directing a play. There is also inevitable internal connection in the play. But I'm not avant-garde. I just follow the golden mean. It has something to do

with my start. My root was in realism. I was only not satisfied with the stereotyped Chinese theatrical art. The theatrical art should be rich and colorful. Why is there only one way of expression? I want to show people more ways of expression. The concept of avant-garde means to break off with tradition and it is a totally creative theatre art form. I never mean to break off with the tradition. I have no such a courage or an idea.

After the success of "Absolute Signal", Lin directed other works like *The Station*, *Barbarian*, etc. He had his own unique views and ways of expression in these works. We may say he is indisputably one of the leading directors of the avant-garde theatre art.

Meng Jinghui, a director graduated from the Central academy of Drama in Beijing, is one of the representatives of Chinese experimental theatre. At the beginning of his career, he did not focus on the traditional theatre stage. After years of practice in the experimental theatrical art, he has created many miracles. In 1999, he directed *Rhinoceros in Love*, an experimental play, which created a box office miracle. He has established his own unique style in terms of dramatic ideas and expressive techniques in the following works such as *Amber*, *Life Advice of Two Dogs* and *The Accidental Death of an Anarchist*. As the artistic director of Beehive Theatre, which was completed in 2007, he has produced many experimental plays. To this day, Meng Jinghui holds a very high position in the hearts of the young people who love avant-garde theatrical art. He has also become one of the few excellent theatre managers who successfully ran resident performance of experimental theatre dramas.

As one of the younger generation directors, Li Bonan is obviously different from the above two directors. Although he also graduated from the Department of Directing in Central Academy of Drama, he catered to young audiences at the beginning of his career, to explore the commercial potential of the experimental dramas. He has produced a lot of plays with distinctive personal characteristics, including *How Much Love Can Be Fooled?*, *The Leftover Girl*, *Married to A Honest Man*, *Mr. and Mrs. Single*, etc. All of these works were welcomed by audiences. Director Li might not have explored deeply enough in the experimental theatre art, but the commercial value and social influences of his works have attracted many attention and investments.

In addition to the above individual directors, Mahua Fun Age is one of the experimental-commercial forces that should not be underestimated. As a company that produces theatrical products on an industrial scale, they have nearly given up the exploration of the possibility of the experimental theatrical art, focusing instead on the commercial value of it. After more than ten years of effort, Mahua Fun Age has become the biggest stage drama brand in China. The company also transformed its drama products into TV or movies, which were spread on different media platforms. The pattern is: theatrical works are its basis, and film and television works its major, and the symbiosis between the two forms see TV and film scripts reappropriated for the stage.

Besides, many experimental theatre directors who are active in the front line have their own teams in Beijing and Shanghai, who work constantly to cultivate an audience for this kind of art. Meanwhile, college students' dramatic arts are also developing rapidly. Some of their works are excellent and have been appraised by professional dramatists. To some extent, these works have generated commercial value, too. The government also supports the development of college students' dramatic clubs to a certain extent.

### Experimental Theatre Art's Localization in China

The rise of the experimental theatre art in Europe was to break away from the control of commercialization and let more dramatists to explore the possibilities of the theatrical arts in a wider space. Conversely, in China, the rise of the experimental theatrical art was to solve the awkward situation of lack of audience.

After more than thirty years development, the experimental theatrical arts in Beijing and Shanghai have formed into separate art styles. As the cultural and political centre, Beijing has formed a kind of serious experimental theatrical art. With support from the government, dramatists in Beijing have enough funds to explore the art and the negative effect of low box office returns can be reduced to some extent. However, it has caused a characteristic deformity. That is, there are always many distinguished and professional guests in the theatres, but very few members of the general public would buy tickets to watch the drama.

Totally different from Beijing's situation, Shanghai theatres have no such "assignments". They highly depend on the market and compete fiercely. No audience means no box office revenue. No box office revenue means bankruptcy. For this reason, the atmosphere of Shanghai commercial drama is very tense, and it has cultivated a large audience who is willing to buy tickets to watch the performance. Meanwhile, in order to expand the influence of the experimental theatrical art, commercial means like adapting movies into dramas and introducing movie stars in theatre performance also have been integrated into the Shanghai theatre market. Vigorous development of the experimental theatrical art has brought unprecedented vitality for many private troupes. Low initial investment can reduce risks and bring high profits, which has attracted a lot of capital to operate the experimental theatres.

In addition to the experimental drama, experimental musicals, experimental children's drama, and even experimental Xiqu plays have quietly emerged. In 2000, Xiqu director Zhang Manjun cooperated with playwright Sheng Heyu to create an experimental Jingju, *Splashing Water in Front of the Horse*. Different from the traditional version, this work adopted the flashback method to explore the modern ideas in Xiqu. As an excellent platform, the experimental theatres are quietly changing the modes of different stage arts.



## The Future of Experimental Theatre Art in China

If we follow the nature of the experimental theatrical art, the Chinese version has gone astray: star theatres, a lot of sensationalism, sky-high ticket prices, and other non-art-related phenomena are emerging one after another. Some experts believe that the Chinese experimental theatre art has become completely "depraved". There is no deep exploration of the stage art and the art frontier, but instead, the art is obedient to the prevailing trends and has become a mercenary tool for some people. Others argue that not all people take the experimental theatre art as a cash cow. There are still people who insist on exploring the theatrical art and using the experimental theatres as a platform to research theatre ideas. But these ideas are staying inside the theatre—a quite self-satisfied behaviour within the industry.

From the point of view of the author, the experimental theatrical art is an art form above the traditional stage art. It started from the exploration in the experimental field by dramatists. But this is just a beginning. If we can't combine exploration with the demands of audience, it's just like locking ourselves in an ivory tower. The audience is an indispensable part of the theatre. By attracting the audience into the theatres, the theatrical art is finally realized. But, if we produce similar, non-thought-provoking, simple industrial plays, audiences would not buy tickets, and the experimental theatre will decline. Based on this premise, the experiments come into commerce and out in the form of art. In the final presentation, we will give the audience excellent theatre plays, avoiding industrialization and adhering to the experimental spirit. Perhaps in the future, the experimental theatre in China can go further and further.

*LI YIGENG*

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# Beijing People's Art Theatre

HAN SHUANG

Beijing People's Art Theatre is the first art theatre company in China, which was established in June 1952 in the courtyard of No. 56 Shijia Hutong (now No. 20) in Dongcheng District, Beijing. Its first director was the famous playwright Cao Yu, and now Ren Ming is in charge of the theatre. In the course of more than 60 years of development, Beijing People's Art Theatre has gradually formed its distinctive style of acting known as the school of "Beijing People's Artistic Acting Style". It is formed through its long-term artistic practices and accumulation of aesthetic theories, which are a combination of realism with Chinese nationalization and the dramatic aesthetics of experience, presentation and representation.

As a long-established Chinese theatre, Beijing People's Art Theatre belongs to the Ministry of Culture. It benefits from the financial subsidies given by the government, and its organizational structure follows the traditional model of a national theatre company. Several major institutional adjustments have been made since its establishment such as personnel rearrangements of various departments through different periods, which has indirectly reflected the Chinese political and cultural movements in different periods. Nowadays, it mainly consists of four functional departments: artistic performance, stage art production, art administration and theatre management. The theatre museum of Beijing People's Art Theatre, which was opened in 2004, is the first theatre museum in China. The museum has up to 150,000 collections, including the manuscripts of Cao Yu and Jiao Juyin, as well as the correspondences in between former artists such as Guo Moruo, Lao She, and Shen Congwen in creating different dramas.

Beijing People's Art Institute has taken drama production as its mission since its establishment and has always assumed such responsibility as social promotion and education, which makes it an important representative of the mainstream culture of the country. As a state-owned theatre company that combines its theatre and troupe, its main venue is the Capital Theatre, which was built in 1956, following which were built the Little Theatre and the Experimental Theatre. The theatre includes an eminent

acting team, represented by the artists of older generation such as Yu Shizhi, Xia Chun, Zhu Xu, Zhu Lin, and Lan Tianye, as well as many well-known contemporary actors, who were once or are still active in Chinese drama as well film and television stage, such as Pu Cunxin, Liang Guanhua, Yang Lixin, Song Dandan, Feng Yuanzheng, etc. They represent the top of Chinese performing arts. At the same time, Beijing People's Art Theatre also possesses its own theatre to create a series of their typical productions.

Since its establishment, Beijing People's Art Theatre has staged in total more than 300 works of different styles, both classic and modern, domestic and foreign. In the 1950s and 1960s, the representative repertoires include *Teahouse*, *Rickshaw Boy*, *Thunderstorm*, *Sunrise*, *Peking Man*, *Guan Hanqing*, *Hu Fu*, *Cai Wenji*, and so on by masters like Lao She, Cao Yu, Guo Moruo, and most of them are directed by Jiao Juyin of the People's Art Theatre, who is known as the "Soul of the Theatre".

Jiao Juyin has tried to integrate the Stanislavski acting and directing theory with the aesthetic principles of Xiqu in his own directing practice since he became the artistic director of the theatre, and has thereafter gradually formed a directorial style with Chinese national characteristics. In 1954, the institute became the first theatre to perform *Thunderstorm* since the foundation of P.R.C. In 1958, *Teahouse* also premiered there, and it has witnessed its 700<sup>th</sup> performances on June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2018. As 60 years went by, *Teahouse* enjoys the highlight of its influence on Beijing People's Art Theatre as well as the history of modern Chinese drama. In the meantime, a series of foreign dramas have also been staged at the theatre such as *L'avare*, *Aesop*, and *Homer Sometimes Nods*.

Since the 1980s, the repertory of Beijing People's Art Institute has become increasingly diversified. Many modern drama classics were hatched there, such as the historical dramas *Wang Zhaojun*, *Li Bai*, *Our Jingke*, and *Si Maqian*, or the realistic dramas *Xiaojing Hutong*, *The World's Top Restaurant (Tianxia diyi lou)*, *Councils on Wedding and Funerals* (Hongbai Xishi), *Uncle Doggie's Nirvana*, *Birdman* performed in little theatre, and *Absolute Signal* performed in experimental little theatre, the novel adaptation of the drama *The first Intimate Contact*, *The Sadness of Comedy Xiju de Youshang*, etc.

It's worth noting that performance of *Absolute Signal* directed by Lin Zhaohua caused a great sensation in China's drama circle. The performance at the time was a fresh stimulus for China's theatre culture and heralded the little theatre movement, not only by the aesthetic thoughts of the director, but also the form of the stage performance. Directed by Lin Zhaohua and written by Liu Jinyun, *Uncle Doggie's Nirvana* became another outstanding performance in the history of Beijing People's Art Theatre in the 1980s. The play was brand new from the writing style to direction, as well as the image of "uncle doggie". It's safe to conclude that the theatre has made great

contributions to the development of Chinese little theatre and avant-garde theatre by its dynamic innovation on the premise of adhering to the nationalization of drama.

During this period, a series of famous foreign dramas were performed in Beijing People's Art Theatre, such as Friedrich Dürrenmatts's *The Visit*, Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus*, Arthur Miller's *The Death of the Salesman*, Donald Coburn's *The Gin Game*, Herman Wouk's *The Caine Mutiny* and so on. These works have been performed and revived many times, the most recent one being the *The Gin Gam* starring Pu Cunxin and Gong Lijun in May 2019. The classic works such as *Teahouse*, *Thunderstorm* and *The World's Top Restaurant (Tianxia diyi lou)* not only represent the depth of thought and development of Chinese drama, but also symbolize how the spirit of the Beijing People's Art Theatre passes from generation to generation.

On pursuing the "literality of theatre", People's Art Theatre attaches great importance to classic repertory. Therefore, while inheriting the outstanding culture of China and other countries in the world, it also cultivates the spirit of its own. As a national art theatre company, it plays its part in cultural exchange throughout various historical periods. From September 25 to November 13, 1980, Lao She's *Teahouse* by the People's Art Theatre was invited to visit and perform in Germany, France and Belgium. This was the first time that Chinese drama had toured abroad after the reforming and opening up, and it was met with great success upon its foreign premiere. There were also numerous premieres of foreign classics in China produced by the Theatre. In 1998, *Waiting for Godot* was put on the stage of the Capital Theatre, setting a record for the premiere of this renowned work in China. Since the 21st century, Beijing People's Art Theatre has further undertaken the obligation of spreading Chinese drama and Chinese culture. In 2018, the historical drama performed at the Marseille Theatre in France. In 2019, *Li Bai* and *Sima Qian* were also performed in Kazan, and St. Petersburg in Russia respectively.

Ren Ming is now the head of Beijing People's Art Theatre. He is also a theatre director and has directed a variety of plays for the Theatre over the years, by whose direction the style and course of Beijing People's Art Theatre's creation is influenced. He actively explores the various expressions of "Beijing Charm" and strives to manifest Beijing's urban aesthetics and humanistic characteristics during different periods by his work *Beijing Big Uncle (Beijing Daye)*, *Wangfujing* and *The Player*. In addition, he has tirelessly explored the connotation of "Oriental Drama" by his direction of Guo Qihong's three historical works: *Confidential*, *Our Jingke* and *Sima Qian*.

Ren Ming is not only the manager of People's Art Theatre, but also is living up to the name of an "art director". He adheres to the thought that "the classic dramas are not old-fashioned, and staging them makes them anew", and has always maintained the artistry and creativity of the Theatre's works. In the summer of 2019, the historical drama *Du Fu*, written by Guo Qihong and directed by star actor Feng Yuanzheng,

premiered at the Capital Theatre, presenting *Du Fu* and his “Battlefield of Poetry” to the audience. The stage design of the play finds a Chinese aesthetic conception of beauty between toughness and softness, by applying the metal texture stage design. From June to September 2019, other performances by Beijing People’s Art Theatre include *Contract Marriage*, *Antiques*, *Player*, *Burning Van Gogh*; foreign plays include *Ikus*, *Doll’s House*, *The Caine Mutiny* and so on, and all are reflective of the tradition and style of Beijing People’s Art Theatre to some degree.

# The Evergreen Tree on Chinese Drama Stage—Pu Cunxin

ZHANG QING

Pu Cunxin, the first-class actor of Beijing People's Art Theatre, is a famous Chinese performing artist. He is now also the chairman of the Chinese Theatre Association. In recent years, Pu Cunxin, who has rarely appeared in film and television works, has always been a shining star on the drama stage. Now nearing 70 years of age, he is still in fine fettle, and deserves his place among the upper echelons of the Chinese performing arts.

## **Blossom in Both Drama and Film-television: "I'm the one who's always performing."**

Pu Cunxin, whose father was an actor and director of Beijing People's Art Theatre, was born in 1953 in Beijing. He grew up in a special period when he experienced life in Beidahuang (the Great Northern Wilderness in northern China). In 1977, Pu Cunxin



■ Spoken drama *Hamlet*, 1989

was admitted to the Air Force Political Department Drama Troupe, where his artistic career began. In his first few years in the drama troupe, he often played small roles, but he took all of them seriously.

In 1982, Pu Cunxin got his first important role. At that time, director Wang Gui, also the deputy head of the troupe, was to direct *Zhou Yu Being Nominated as Marshal*, leaving the main character to this diligent young man. It was this play that brought Pu Cunxin the attention of Beijing People's Art Theatre, where he was officially transferred to at the end of 1986.

In Beijing People's Art Theatre, Pu Cunxin gradually found his own direction on the art road. He made progress in his performing in one play after another. *Thunderstorm* in 1989, *Hamlet* in 1990, *Seagull* and *Libai* in 1991, which have become classic plays of Beijing People's Art Theatre. In addition to drama, Pu Cunxin has made great achievements in film and television. He has played some main roles in many classic TV dramas familiar to Chinese people. These roles had brought him many national awards, such as the best actor of Golden Rooster Award of Chinese film, excellent actor of Huabiao Film Award, and so on.

In recent years, there are fewer opportunities for viewers to see Pu Cunxin on TV and in cinemas, because he devoted a lot of time and energy to the drama stage and has won the Plum Blossom Award twice. In July 2015, he was elected the chairman of the Chinese Theatre Association. "I'm in my 60s, and I've been an actor for about thirty or forty years, and I can't incite laughter," he said. "If I can't do a movie, I won't do it. I have a place, a stage and a chance. "

## Realistic Performance Based on the Nation

Jiao Juyin, the founder and director of Beijing People's Art Theatre, once said, "We should adhere to the realistic way of performance and require actors to go deep into the realities of life and stick to the people's stance. Only in this way can we act well." This view has always been kept in mind by Pu Cunxin.

Pu Cunxin is known as the actor who has performed Shakespeare's plays and Chekhov's plays most in China. Stanislavsky's performance theory has deeply influenced his artistic concept. Since he played in *Hamlet* for the first time when he just entered the Beijing People's Art Theatre, he has made an indissoluble bond with Shakespeare. In the following decades, he successively appeared in such plays as *King Lear*, *The Tempest* and *Coriolanus*, which brought him a reputation of "professional actor of Shakespeare's plays".

In Pu Cunxin's mind, Shakespeare, whose rich artistic value can be explored for life, is like a mountain. His performance method is always based on realism. While



■ *The Wilderness*, 2010

expressing Shakespeare's thoughts and feelings, he combines the real society with it to explore the possibility of infinite expression. In 1990, Pu Cunxin starred in *Hamlet* for the first time (directed by Lin Zhaohua), and the Hamlet acted by him was melancholy, contradictory and neurotic. As a young actor with little experience then, his performance at that time was commendable, but it was not beyond expectation. In 2018, nearly 30 years later, Pu Cunxin again performed in *Hamlet* (director Li Liuyi). This time, he played the greedy and vicious Claudius. The change of roles was full of freshness for Pu Cunxin. This performance made him take a big step forward in exploring Shakespeare.

In order to play really good roles on the stage, Pu Cunxin often studies all aspects of the characters. It is easy to be similar in form, but difficult to be alike in spirit. Especially in playing historical characters, in addition to their appearances, it is more important to grasp their spirit. That is to say, actors should study the history, environment, thought, habits and other aspects of the characters. At the end of 2019, *Lin Zexu*, a drama starring Pu Cunxin, was staged in the National Grand Theatre. To create the great national hero Lin Zexu, how could he avoid the single character image and make the story move the audience? Pu Cunxin believes that the most important thing is whether the creative attitude is sincere.

On the issue of dialogue between Chinese and foreign drama and performance art, Pu Cunxin believes that Chinese drama should express the true feelings of the nation, so as to communicate and dialogue with the world: "Just as Mr. Jiao Juyin proposed that Chinese drama should be nationalized. We should make our own themes, express our national spirit, character and quality, create together with the audience, and let the audience have resonance."



## Endless Pursuit of Art

Pu Cunxin, now 67 years old, is no longer a young actor on the stage, but he is still not satisfied.

Once a fanatical fan of Pu Cunxin said that he would give Pu 200 points in his performance, which is a very rare affirmation for an actor. However, Pu Cunxin said that the stage art or even all art creation should invite the audience to participate in and ponder together, and he would prefer to be criticized by the audience. From a historical point of view, how could we connect our ancestors with the 21st century, especially with the young people at present? Are young people willing to explore the past history and society? Since the dramatists have taken the responsibility, they should discuss these themes with the audience in an artistic and easy way. These are what Pu Cunxin has been thinking all the time and his creative attitude has never been changed.

In 2018, Pu Cunxin joined hands with the National Grand Theatre to launch Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. It is a cooperative project with the famous British theatre group Royal Shakespeare Company, directed by Tim Sharp, a famous British theatre director. Pu Cunxin admitted that this cooperation was a very special experience, from which he has learned a lot. He concentrated on finding and discovering, hoping to find a harmonious presentation way, so as to truly create a version of *The Tempest* belonging to China. His performance was very successful and won praise at home and abroad. In his view, art is endless, and it is his eternal goal to find more possibilities on the stage.

When talking about his several performances and different roles in *Hamlet*, Pu Cunxin said frankly: "Today, when we perform *Hamlet*, we feel that there are endless contents. We can't help having interest. We should use our lives to create and form stage images, and let the characters in words live in front of the audience. Today's artists had better talk to Shakespeare about 'can we act like this?' He may not reply, but the audience may. It's a very interesting communication on and off stage. There are many audience sitting under each performance. Not all of them are praising us, but we have expressed our attitudes on the stage. We want to hear the comments and the criticism."

In his spare time, Pu Cunxin often pays attention to and watches excellent performances all over the world, and participates in drama festivals and art exhibitions. He is eager to know where his gap and progress space are, which is a very rare mindset for a famous actor. Mere praise is not enough for him. When talking about his wishes for the future, he does not hesitate to blurt out, "Come across good plays again and again."

For him, stage is more like the bearing of life, and the width of life is far greater than the stage. He knows clearly that artistic creation should be based on accumulation



■ *The Tempest*, 2018

and development. People engaged in artistic creation should pay attention to their own cultivation, including learning in life, self-cultivation and self-discipline. In addition to his work, Pu Cunxin has also done a lot of public welfare undertakings. He not only works by himself, but also introduced his family and friends to do it together. In his opinion, there is no end to being a human being, just as there is no real end to art.

Mei Baojiu, master of Jingju, once said, "To audiences, it is better to praise the performance after returning home". Pu Cunxin was impressed by it deeply. As an actor, one should not fight and compete for the applause and praises. He should try his best to do his job well and get long-term recognition from the audience. This is his ideal artistic realm and also his realm of being human.

ZHANG QING  
Doctoral student at Shanghai Theatre Academy

## Introduction to Classical Xiqu Plays (II)

HUANG JINGFENG

### *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai (or Butterfly Lovers, Yueju<sup>1</sup> )*

The story of *Butterfly Lovers* is one of the four famous folk legends in China. It has been performed by different Chinese local Xiqu. Among them, the Yueju version is the most influential. It has been circulating on the Yueju stage for a long time. People can even explore the development track of the Yueju through studying the creation and acceptance situation of the Yueju *Butterfly Lovers* in different periods. Since 1949 when the People's Republic of China was founded, the script of Yueju *Butterfly Lovers* has been revised again and again. The 1950s was a key period when the play was changed greatly in its thought and art, and also a crucial link in its classicization process. In the process of constant revisions of Yueju *Butterfly Lovers* in the 1950s, different versions, such as the "National Day" version, the "Session" version, the movie version and the *Selections of Xiqu* version, were formed.

In the early 1950s, *The Lament of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* was performed at the Lido Grand Theatre in Shanghai, led by Fan Ruijuan and Fu Quanxiang. They played the roles of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai separately. In August of that year, Dongshan Yueju Club performed *The Lament of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* in Beijing, invited by the Ministry of Culture. Before the National Day of 1951, the Xiqu Research Centre of East China organized to revise the script again, in order to take part in the second anniversary party of People's Republic of China. The name of the play was changed into *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*. Hereafter, it was revised several times. In 1953, a colour Yueju movie *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* was shot by the Shanghai Union Film Studio. In September, 1958, *Selections of Xiqu* was published by China Drama Publishing House. The script of the Yueju version was taken in, being

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1 Yueju is one of chinese traditional Xiqu, and originated from Zhejiang Province.

signed as “Narrated by Yuan Xuefen and Fan Ruijuan, and revised by Xu Jin and others.”

The story outline runs as follows:

A squire, Mr. Zhu, who was living in the Zhu village, Shangyu, Zhejiang, had a daughter called Zhu Yingtai, with a childhood name “Jiumei” (the ninth younger sister). Zhu Yingtai gave her heart completely to studying in Hangzhou, like boys. But she was a girl and was forbidden to leave her boudoir. She pretended to be ill to scare her father, and then disguised herself as a fortune-teller to try to persuade her father to believe that only letting the daughter go out for studying could cure her. The father didn’t recognize his daughter until she took off her hat and let down her long hair. The daughter’s trick gave further reason for her to pursue an education. Even her father could not see through her disguise, not to mention others. Mr. Zhu loved his daughter very much. After seeing her determination and disguise, he agreed reluctantly.

Like a bird out of a cage, Zhu Yingtai was very happy for the temporary freedom and success offered by the men’s world, and was also curious about the coming student life. Tired on the road, she stopped in a wayside pavilion near a grass bridge, where she met Liang Shanbo who was also going to study in Hangzhou. Liang was refined,



■ *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*

cultivated and handsome. He even supported “feminism” to some extent. He was not against girls being able to study and defended females against the injustice in the society, which made Zhu think he was special and they shared similar ideas. Therefore, the two became sworn brothers.

During three years studying in the same school, they helped each other. Zhu Yingtai fell in love with her sworn brother. However, Liang never realized Zhu was a girl. One day, Zhu received a family letter again from her father. In the letter, her father wrote that he was seriously ill and hoped to see his daughter before he died. Actually though, it was a lie. The father had written several letters before, because he missed the daughter and worried about her safety, only to be ignored. Mr. Zhu could do nothing but tell such a lie. This time, Zhu Yingtai worried about her father very much and she decided to go home. But she hated to part with Shanbo. Her maid Yin Xin suggested that she should tell the truth to the wife of the schoolmaster. So, she left a jade butterfly fan pendant as a token of affection and asked the wife of the schoolmaster to be match-maker. The wife of the master agreed to help her.

The next day, Liang Shanbo saw off Zhu Yingtai. They found it hard to part with each other and walked together along eighteen Li (Li is 0.5 kilometres) of the mountain path. Zhu dropped hints that she was a girl by drawing analogies of things they saw on the way. She hoped to be tied in wedlock with Liang. However, Liang was too pure and honest to understand the hints. Finally, at the wayside pavilion, Zhu could do nothing but tell Liang that he had a younger sister Jiumei who looked like him very much and he was willing to make the match for Liang and Jiumei. Liang was happy to accept it. Zhu asked Liang to come for the marriage before July the seventh of the lunar calendar.

One night, Liang was missing his sworn brother Zhu in his quiet study. The wife of the master came in and told him about Zhu's story. Then Liang realized that Zhu was herself Jiumei. Being wild with joy, Liang, with his page boy Sijiu, left the school for the Zhu village before dawn, to propose marriage. On the way, the familiar things evoked his sweet memories. He blamed himself for not having realized Zhu's deep affection.

However, the deep affection was destroyed, because Zhu Yingtai was betrothed to Ma Wencai, son of Procurator Ma, by Mr. Zhu, just after she came home. Although Zhu Yingtai loved Liang, Mr. Zhu insisted that the Liang family and the Zhu family were not well-matched in social and economic status. When Liang reached the Zhu family excitedly, the two who were apart for a long time were arranged to meet each other in Yingtai's boudoir building. Zhu told Liang that her father disagreed their marriage and had betrothed her to Ma Wencai, which made Liang feel like the skies were falling and the earth opening up. Coming to his senses after the grief, Liang wanted to ask for help in the local authority. But Zhu told him that the local authority acted in collusion with squires. Both of them were saddened by their own misfortune. At the parting time, they swore “even if they could not marry while living, they would be a pair beyond the grave.”

Being ill from the sorrow, Liang died not long after he got home. Zhu Yingtai was heartbroken when hearing the bad news. And then she determined to die for love. She told her father that she wanted to hold a memorial ceremony for Liang on her way to the Ma family. If not, she would not get into the bridal sedan chair. Mr. Zhu had no choice but agreed. When the bridal sedan chair passed along Shanbo's tomb in Huqiao Town, Zhu Yingtai came out of it and cried before the tomb. Suddenly, with heavy winds and strong thundering and lightning, the tomb was split in the middle, and Zhu Yingtai jumped into it without hesitation. In a twinkling, the sky become clear. A pair of butterflies flew out of the tomb. It's said that they were Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai. They flew freely among fresh flowers, never to be separated.

After being revised again and again, the images of Liang and Zhu have become purer and more beautiful. The plot has been made more compact, and the emotions have been expressed in a more reasonable way. What's more, Yueju *Butterfly Lovers* has received political authentication. The conflict between the two lovers and Mr. Zhu has been considered as a kind of class struggle. The play is not only a "sad love story", but also a political allegory. The failure in Liang and Zhu's marriage is rooted in the social class oppression and the masculinity discourse. Therefore, this play also has a theme of anti-feudalism.

### ***Dream of the Red Chamber, Yueju***

*Dream of the Red Chamber*, written by Cao Xueqin, a writer in the Qing Dynasty, is a globally influential novel about worldly affairs. It's a traditional Chinese novel with each chapter headed by a couplet giving the gist of its content. It's also the universally acknowledged peak of Chinese classical novel literature. After the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, Xu Jin, a playwright in Shanghai Yueju Troupe, adapted the famous novel into a Yueju play. The Yueju *Dream of the Red Chamber*, was premiered in Shanghai in the spring of 1958, led by Xu Yulan and Wang Wenjuan from group two of Shanghai Yueju Troupe. They played the roles of Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu separately. The theatre was sold out for all 54 consecutive performances, amassing a total of 86,343 spectators. In September, 1959, it was performed in Beijing as a tribute to the tenth anniversary of the People's Republic of China and won praise from the Beijing art and literary circles. In 1962, a colour Yueju movie *Dream of the Red Chamber*, divided into two episodes, was shot by Haiyan Film Studio and Hong Kong Jinsheng Film Corporation. The movie was also welcomed when it was shown abroad.

The original novel has more than one million words. It's not an easy work to adapt into a two-or-three-hour Yueju play. Thousands of main threads and details in the novel have to be condensed into a Yueju play of high concentration and a coherent whole. Therefore, the novel should be cut short and restructured in the adaptation.



■ *Dream of the Red Chamber*

The playwright Xu Jin extracted a clear clue from the novel: the love story of Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu, and naturally including Jia Baoyu's mischievous behaviour. The Yueju version longed for free love. Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu were rebels of the old days and were incompatible with the surroundings. With the development of the plot, it imputed the tragedy in the class oppression nature of ritual law. Besides the theme of resisting the old social system, and thus the Yueju *Dream of the Red Chamber*, also acquired its political legitimacy.

The story outline runs as follows:

After her mother died when she was young, Lin Daiyu, weak and sick, was taken to her grandma's home. There she met her cousin Jia Baoyu, and they felt like old friends at first meeting. The next year, Xue Baochai, a well-bred girl of good lineage, came to the Jia family too. Baoyu was born with a treasured jade from his mother's womb. Baochai had a gold decorative lock. People said behind their backs that Baoyu and Baochai were a good match of gold and jade. Although Baoyu got along well with sisters and cousins in the Jia family, he only had similar inclinations with Lin Daiyu.



They avoided the restraints of the aristocratic family and secretly read the banned book *The Romance of West Chamber* together. Baoyu's father Jia Zheng hoped the son would embark on the road of an official career. But Baoyu despised official positions and riches and was against traditional ethics and rites. Baochai also hoped for him to focus on studying to pursue official ranks. One day, she came to Happy Red Court (Baoyu's residence) and talked about the way to make a name by pursuing official ranks, which was loathed by Baoyu. He asked Baochai to leave, with no trace of politeness. His maid Xiren blamed him for his turning a cold shoulder to Baochai. But Baoyu said, "Lin has never said these absurd words!" Lin Daiyu happened to pass by and heard it. She was surprised and happy. She thought Baoyu was her bosom friend.

Jia Zheng had brooded on Baoyu's rebelling behaviors all the time. He seized on the fact that Baoyu was in close contact with Qiguan, a theatrical performer of low status, and beat Baoyu half to death, in order to vent to his anger. Daiyu felt sympathy for Baoyu and cried her eyes out. Baoyu consoled her and later asked his other maid Qingwen to send her the handkerchief used to wipe her tears. Daiyu treasured the handkerchief with affection and wrote a poem on it.

At night, Baochai visited Happy Red Court again and stayed late, which caused Qingwen's antipathy. At that moment, Daiyu came and knocked on the door. Without realizing it was Daiyu, Qingwen refused to open the door, which made Daiyu too feel suspicious. Then she saw Baoyu came out with Baochai, talking and laughing. She misunderstood it. Thinking of her depending on grandma for a living and being alone here, she felt very sorrowful. The next day, Baochai, with others, accompanied Old Ancestress (the grandma of the Jia family) to take sights of the spring in the Lotus Pavilion. However, Daiyu was alone and gloomy on the other side of the garden. Petals falling increased her sadness. She walked lonely deep into the woods and buried the fallen flowers to express her inner depression. She recited, with tears in her eye, a poem *The Song of Burying Fallen Flowers*. Baoyu heard her reciting when picking up fallen petals in the garden and followed the sound to come close. Daiyu intended to avoid to see him for the "refusal" last night. After Baoyu revealed his true feelings sincerely, Daiyu forgave him.

Baoyu and Daiyu were innocent playmates and found each other congenial. And now they knew each other's affection. Once, when Daiyu was sick, her maid Zijuan, sounded out Baoyu's true feelings by lying to him that Daiyu would go back to Suzhou. Taking what he heard as the truth, Baoyu wanted to retain Daiyu, in an insane manner, which exposed their love to everyone. However, Old Ancestress didn't agree to marry Daiyu to Baoyu. She was determined to take Baochai who was meek and virtuous as Baoyu's wife. So, Wang Xifeng, sister-in-law of Baoyu, offered a scheme to stealthily substitute Baochai for Daiyu. Unexpectedly, Shayatou (a silly maid of Old Ancestress) gave the game away. It worsened Daiyu's disease. She burned the treasured handkerchief and all her poetry manuscripts, and died with hatred. On the same day, Baoyu got married with Baochai while he thought the bride was Daiyu. He



was very happy. But later, he was astonished to find that the bride was Baochai. He became angry. Hearing the news of Daiyu's death, he insanely rushed to cry before her memorial tablet. In a tearful voice, he recalled the past and expressed his agony. He saw through the vanity of the human world and left the family.

The touching and sentimental love story of Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu fits with this genre of Chinese traditional Xiqu in the region south of the Yangtze River, Yueju, which has a quality of grace and deep affection. Or, in other words, the common tunes and performance of Yueju were almost tailor-made to tell this love story. This is the fundamental reason why Yueju *Dream of the Red Chamber*, has a wide audience. Many of the songs in the Yueju *Dream of the Red Chamber*, are well-known. It has already been one of most important plays and has always been used to teach young Yueju performers. Since then, non-textual renditions of the *Dream of the Red Chamber*, such as comic strips, illustrations, movies, television dramas, mud carvings, Chinese paintings, etc., have all hoped to learn from, imitate or even surpass the visual image presented by the Yueju version. The Yueju *Dream of the Red Chamber*, as the most influential acceptance of the original book in the contemporary era, is undoubtedly a crucial retelling, helping not only to keep alive, but reinvigorate, the original novel.

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# An Inventory of Chinese Theatre in 2019

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Chinese theatre maintained its unremittingly rising trend during 2019, ushering in the "great year" of development. Centring on major historical moments like the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, dramatists constantly adopted realism as their creative theme, producing not only a batch of realistic works that reflected the changing life of citizens but also historical works depicting the magnificent revolution. A number of historical/costume works were also worth mentioning. It can be said that the creation and performance of Chinese theatre ran through a mainline in 2019 to greet the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the new China. The centralized selection of many important theatre awards, including the 29<sup>th</sup> Plum Performance Award and the 23<sup>rd</sup> Cao Yu Script Award, and the holding of plenty of theatre performance events like the 2<sup>nd</sup> Xiqu Gala (Kunshan), both provided broad platforms to the extension of the main creation line. Besides, newly created regional, folk, and commercial theatre festivals were brought into the view of urban cultural construction, which also marked the new trend of diversified Chinese theatre creation and performances.

## I. Xiqu: "Inheritance and Innovation" on a Realistic Basis

From May 20<sup>th</sup> to June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2019, the 12<sup>th</sup> China Art Festival was carried out in Shanghai, and 51 outstanding stage artworks from all over the country participated in the exhibition. Among them, the 16<sup>th</sup> Wenhua Award evaluated 17 Xiqu pieces, such as Qianju *Sky Stream*, Yuju *Chongdu Ferry*, Suju *Soul of National Tripods*, Huangmeixi *Deng Jiaxian*, Huju *The Daughter of Dunhuang* and a further four pieces. The Wenhua Award for Xiqu eventually went to *Wang Gui and Li Xiangxiang*, *Chongdu Ferry*, *Soul of National Tripods*, and *Li Baoguo*.

Based on Li Ji's long poem, Qinqiang *Wang Gui and Li Xiangxiang* implies a strong spirit of political participation. Poetically, the work emphasizes the multi-layered emotional catharsis from individual desires and national political ethics but lacks plot compilation. After more than 70 years, it was once again put on the stage. Qinqiang *Wang Gui and Li Xiangxiang* boldly "grafted" poetry to other art forms. Poem singing of the third-person narration and opera singing from the first-person perspective was "switched" between Qinqiang arias and chorus with piano accompaniment. Conclusive lyrical expressions clarified the type and level of emotions, and recapitulative introduction smoothed the story development and emotional outburst. It is worth mentioning that chorus with piano accompaniment, as an auxiliary, actively participated in the main Xiqu performance, expanding the artistic connotation without usurping the host's role.

Yuju *Chongdu Ferry* focused on the hot issue of poverty alleviation, creating a kind, wise and humorous deputy township head based on Ma Haiming, a grass-roots cadre. He overcame a number of difficulties to initiate a new model of rural revitalization and village construction, building a poetic dwelling for residents. The Chongdu Ferry has become a nationally famous tourist attraction and resorts since the exploitation. The production highlighted the complicated inner world of characters, especially making flexible use of traditional programmes to externalize characters' emotions, which delivered an astounding effect.

Centring on the destiny of two precious tripods, the story of Suju *Soul of National Tripods* was adapted from a moving history that the Pan family in Suzhou protected the two tripods from destruction and plunderage during the late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China. Pan Dayu, the protagonist, was a young lady with no idea about the tripods at first. However, in the face of the successive death of her husband and father-in-law, she had to entrust the family to protect the treasure. The work took a large space to depict the heroine's inner change from "imitating" to "perceiving". Brilliant arias carried forward her perception of the tripods layer by layer from "individual" and "family" to "nation" and "country". The promoting process of the character's thought was well established, and "Pan Dayu" was no longer a plain symbol but a real display of human nature. The play proved that work can present the growth of characters in a meticulous manner.

Heibeibangzi *Li Baoguo* took the model of the times of Li Baoguo, who was a professor at Hebei Agricultural University, as the prototype to create the story. By reproducing scenes of Li's work and daily life such as going into the mountains, bagging apples, supporting students, and writing his papers on the Taihang Mountains, the work showed Li's devoting and diligent spirit as a scientific researcher and college professor. The work followed the advantages and principles of the aesthetic creation of Xiqu, carefully carving Hebei's contemporary hero by underlining both details and core arias. Li Baoguo's aria in the seventh act, "I would like to turn

peasants into me and me into an old peasant”, especially express the theme of the play.

From Oct. 26<sup>th</sup> to Nov. 12<sup>th</sup>, the 16<sup>th</sup> China Theatre Festival was held in Fuzhou with increasingly diversified theatre categories and genres. There were 19 modern plays and 8 costume plays among the 27 Xiqu pieces of 21 Xiqu genres. Representative modern plays included Jingju *The Story of the Red Army*, Yiyangqiang *Fang Zhimin*, and Hebeibangzi *Monument to the People's Heroes*. Other remarkable modern plays involved Jinju *Qifeng Street* starred by Xie Tao, a female Lao Sheng, and *Sister Jiang* starred by Shen Tiemei. Historical and costume plays mainly included Puxianxi *A Travel with an Umbrella*, Minju *Red Skirt*, and Longtai *Prince*.

*The Story of the Red Army* is a major production of the China National Jingju Troupe, which delivers three stories during the long march, “Half a Belt”, “Half a Quilt”, and “The Quartermaster”. Each story contains a “memory” with distinct expression techniques: “Half a Belt” utilised a belt to draw forth the heroic sacrifice of the old squad leader's son, indicating the determination of Chinese people to unite and defend their country; in “Half a Quilt”, Xu Jiexiu, performed by Yuan Huiqin, changed her costumes twice to show the audience the close relationship between the military and civilian which spanned more than half a century; in “The Quartermaster”, Huo Yan persistently gave his clothes to other comrades to ensure the logistics supply, but eventually froze himself to death in the snow mountain.

Huaiju *Taking You Across the River* was created on the background that fishermen of Ludi Village in central Jiangsu helped troops cross the river on the eve of the Crossing-the-Yangtze-River Campaign. It depicted the story between the Jiang family and the liberation army. The playwright's bold construction and breakthrough promoted the dramatic tension in story development, character relationships, and emotional rendering. First of all, the playwright did not evade the weakness and imperfections of heroes in their character portrayal. Second, he skilfully utilised foreshadowing and suspense with detail processing to settle a befitting narrative rhythm for the play. Moreover, he accurately set up lyrical plots in the narration to enrich the character personality.

Taking time as the clue, Huaiju *Mr. Wu Xun* extracted several significant turning points in Wu Xun's life to reconstruct his life track as “Mister” and brought the audience the life experience of “no hero but a hero, no sage but a sage”. In the play, Monk Liaozheng was the key role of the plot as well as the character's contrast to Wu Xun. As a bosom friend of Wu Xun, he witnessed every vital turning point in Wu Xun's life and played a certain role in promoting the twists. They both cultivated themselves in the secular world according to their respective belief. Liaozheng's belief fell on god, but Wu Xun's belief fell on humanity. Like Wu Xun said to Liaozhang, “hundreds of Buddhas, thousands of Buddhas, are no match for disciples to read books. Homage

to gods and ghosts, salvation of afterlife, are no match for relieving the poor in the present life.” These simple words profoundly demonstrated that Confucianists do not believe in external assistance but themselves, which refers to their thought of the “benevolent human”.

In 2019, the 4<sup>th</sup> National Community Xiqu Performance was routinely carried out. Participated in mainly by professional Xiqu troupes of communities from cities and counties, the event presented the current creation situation and performing level of these troupes considering the nationwide balance. There were 17 modern plays among the 30 Xiqu taking part in the activity, the proportion of which was slightly higher than costume plays. Xiqu like Qinqiang *Guanzhong Xiaoyue* and Liyuanxi *Chen Zhongzi* were relatively impressive plays in recent years.

From Nov. 10<sup>th</sup> to Dec. 5<sup>th</sup>, the 2nd National Southern Xiqu Performance was held in Wuhan, aiming at creating an image of Wuhan as an Xiqu hub. The repertoire was a collection of recent operas in southern provinces, which had many similarities with it in other art and theatre festivals, like *Minju Life*, and *Yuju Faith*. Among them, Huju *The Daughter of Dunhuang* took “Dunhuang”, a momentous confluence of civilization in “the Belt and Road Initiative”, as the background. Focusing on the life of Fan Jinshi, the third Dean of Dunhuang Academy, the work showed her decades of devotion to the research on Dunhuang caves. Besides, the Experimental Theatre Xiqu Festival, which has attracted large attention to the Xiqu community, also came off in Beijing and Shanghai as usual. Rejuvenated creators, avant-garde creation techniques, and diversified experimental genres have become the common pursuit of the Xiqu creation of Experimental Theatre. Works emerged during the year, including mixed Xiqu *Longing for Worldly Pleasures (Sifan)*, *Departure Song of Beauties*, Hong Kong Yueju *Visiting the Valley*, and Shaoxingxi *Gorgeous Bajie*, all worthy of attention with their unique art techniques and profound humanistic sensibilities.

## II. Chinese Stage: Seeking Breakthroughs in the Simultaneous Development of Diversity

Chinese stage plays can be described as diversified and flourishing in 2019. There were many noteworthy excellent realistic works like *Everything is a Miracle* by National Theatre of China, *Dining Issue of Chen Huansheng* by Changzhou Farce Troupe, *The Best of Chang'an* by Xi'an Theatre and *Memory Code* by Sichuan People's Art Theatre. Besides, original plays of various themes also enriched the style and substance of stage play creation, such as *The Whole Night Meeting in Sanwan* by National Theatre of China and *The Crossroad* by National Centre for the Performing

Arts of China of the red theme, *Du Fu* by Beijing People's Art Theatre and *Lin Zexu* jointly produced by National Centre for the Performing Arts of China and Guangzhou Drama Art Centre of the historical theme, as well as *The School of Nobles* by Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre and the opening play of the Beijing Comedy Week *Nalati Grassland Love* of the comedy theme.

In general, the creation of the Chinese stage plays in 2019 presents the following characteristics:

First, the creation technique of realistic plays tends to be diversified. On the one hand, works of hero's tales and historical events strive to seek breakthroughs in the way of expression. In the 12<sup>th</sup> China Art Festival, the two stage plays winning the Wenhua Award were *Gu Wenchang* by National Theatre of China and *Liu Qing* by Xi'an Theatre. *Gu Wenchang* told the story that the protagonist transformed the "barren island" to "treasure island" during his tenure as the Party Secretary of Dongshan County, Fujian Province, striving to achieve the "dream" of beautiful Dongshan. Through multiple modifications of the script, the creator emphasised the deepening of characters' personality and emotion, inserting in large numbers of emotional scenes between Gu Wenchang and his wife Shi Yingping and strengthening the emotional conflict between him and the County Chief Lv Zhiyuan. *Liu Qing* reappeared the life track of the contemporary writer Liu Qing, who resolutely gave up the high-quality living condition in big cities, resigned as Deputy Secretary of the county party committee, and moved to the countryside for 14 years in order to write *Builders of the New Life*. Many lines in the work are simple but vivid with a large number of the central Shaanxi dialect full of local customs; the skilful use of Kuaiban strings life and work scenes of Liu Qing together, not only breaking the limitation of the single narrative in plays but also explaining the event background, expressing the central Shaanxi customs and promoting the story development. In addition, *The Whole Night Meeting in Sanwan* by the National Theatre of China brought the "Sanwan Conference" to the stage, shrinking the plot to one conference. To increase the "dramatism" of the work, the playwright adopted two important measures. First, by inserting incidents before the conference, such as Mao Zedong's proposition of retreat, the author not only broke the monotony of the plain narrative but explained the necessity of the military reform to the audience. Second, the author presented what occurred outside the venue in different areas of the stage. A more diversified perspective of presentation eased the excess participation of main characters in the narration and conveyed a sense of history.

On the other hand, compared with the "Main Melody" creation in recent years, which mostly concentrated on major historical events and outstanding figures, theatres in 2019 excavated more highlights and the spirit of the time from the ordinary, such as *The Heart of Heaven*, *Everything is a Miracle*, *Dining Issue of Chen Huansheng*, *Memory Code* and *Unfold the Year of 1990* (Huang Ying Studio in Beijing). *The Heart*

*of Heaven* of Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre focuses on generations of aircraft designers, test pilots, and flight test engineers who devoted themselves to the development of China's civil aviation industry. From the perspective of Tang Ying, an aircraft designing engineer, the work showed the aircraft manufacturing and the journey of Chinese civil aviation professionals. *Everything is a Miracle* of the National Theatre of China portrayed a grass-roots cadre Su Xiaoyu, who has a flamboyant personality and the enthusiasm of the youth, also has weaknesses and tricks of the ordinary. He solved a series of daily conflicts, demonstrating the new look of grass-roots work through humorous singing. Both themed the growth of ordinary people, *Memory Code* of Sichuan People's Art Theatre, and *Unfold the Year of 1990* directed by Huang Ying composed lyric poems of the entrepreneurship of PRC and the reform and opening up. Unfortunately, we notice that some works have not yet jumped out of the grandiose pattern, lacking a solid practical basis and sloganeering graphic works.

Second, the reproduction of the classics has aroused a wide range of contention. Works worthy of attention in 2019 include *The Antiques* by Beijing People's Art Theatre, *A Life of Galileo* by Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre and *Deling and Cixi* jointly performed by Tianjin People's Art Theatre and Hong Kong Repertory Theatre. The "reinterpretation" of *A Life of Galileo* by Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre strengthened the significance of "reinterpretation", largely reduced the characters and plots in the original work and reoriented the role portrayal and acting style especially highlighting the style of "banter". The infusion of cross-gender performance and pop culture, to an extent, enriched the stage vocabulary of the new version and even presented an outstanding spot effect. Under the halo of the playwright, director, and performers, *Deling and Cixi* maintained an equally brilliant level of stage performance. Not only did it change the impression that theatres acted by stars have a weak performance, but it also offered another real case that only by actual strength can theatres win the heart of the audience. With the premise of keeping the traditional theatre style, the limited adaption of *The Antiques* by Beijing People's Art Theatre is fitter for the present. The succession of young performers showed the audience the Beijing People's Art Theatre's future hope of inheriting traditions. Undoubtedly, the most controversial reproduction is the new *Tea House* directed by Meng Jinghui. The contention for the play lasted from Le Festival d'Avignon in July to the performance at Poly Theatre in Beijing in November. The shift of public opinion from "what took place on the stage" to "can the classics be modified" also reflected a certain mentality towards the text and classics in this era.

Third, Sino-foreign cooperation continues to heat up. In 2019, there was the increasing popularity of first-class foreign troupes visiting China to give performances, as well as a prominent tendency for Sino-foreign collaboration in the production of theatre works. Among them, some were the new release of the Chinese version, some were the world debut of foreign director's new version and some were Chinese originals directed by foreign directors. Their commonality was that they were all performed by

Chinese performers, such as *Faust* directed by the Lithuanian director Rimas Tuminas and starred by the famous actor Liao Fan, *Do You Still Play the Guitar* directed by the Lithuanian director Ramney Kuzmanet, written by the famous playwright Wan Fang and starred by Zhang Liang, and *Requiem* directed by the Israeli director Yair Sherman and starred by the famous actor Ni Dahong. The joining of foreign theatre directors has brought new expressions and characters to the stage play performance in China, but it also indicates that the domestic production institutions are not satisfied with the overall level of domestic directors. Another problem to be considered is the deviation of creation intention caused by the “unacclimatization” of culture during Sino-foreign cooperation.

### III. A Sudden Rise of Dance Theatre

During the 12<sup>th</sup> China Art Festival, not only were Xiqu and stage plays covered with glory, but three dance theatres, *The Eternal Wave* by Shanghai Dance Theatre, *The Railway to Tibet* by the National Centre for the Performing Arts, *The Heroic Little Sisters* by Inner Mongolia Arts University, also won the 16<sup>th</sup> Wenhua Award. Dance theatres suddenly became a dazzling “new star”, promoting the “dance theatre fever” in recent years to a new climax. In the commercial performance market of 2019, *The Eternal Wave* by Shanghai Dance Theatre and *Awakening Lion* by Guangzhou Song and Dance Theatre proved to be the “hot cake” of the year with over one hundred performances and prosperous box office. They can be called “phenomenal” works in recent years which perfectly combined the Main Melody and commercial performance and aroused a heated discussion in academia.

On May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2019, as the opening play of the 12<sup>th</sup> China Art Festival, the dance theatre *The Eternal Wave* was performed at Shanghai Grand Theatre. Based on the real experience of Li Bai, an operator of Shanghai underground radio station of the Communist Party of China, the work centred on the last struggling revolutionary course of the protagonist Li Xia before he was arrested, wrestling with the question of “who is the enemy” to demonstrate the constant judging, negotiating and conflicting between both sides in the war. Dancers performed multiple dance types on the stage including modern dance, ballet, classical dance, and tango, and at the same time accurately expressed the personality, emotion, and living state of historical figures. In addition, the organic juxtaposition of a variety of modern stage design technology, installation equipment, and sound design enabled the performance to convey an energetic, intense, cohesive, and shocking life texture. The enthusiastic response of the young audience indicated that this is a dance theatre full of modern aesthetic power.



*Awakening Lion* is a dance theatre taking Sanyuanli Anti-British battle in Guangzhou during the First Opium War as the historical background and the national Intangible Cultural Heritage: Guangdong Lion, as the core element. It is one of the recent dance theatres that truly dig into a regional theme. The creator drew inspirations from the profound cultural soil of the south of the Five Ridges, producing a group of regional cultural symbols fit for dance theatres to comprehensively show the cultural characteristics and spirit of the south. Among them, the awakening lion, southern fist, and wooden bench were the three most frequent images used in the play. Not only did they participate in the story as concrete props, but they also played a metaphorical role as abstract spiritual symbols. The story of *Awakening Lion* did not seem to be extraordinary but to be extremely simple. However, it was the natural quality based on the “simplicity” that led the dance theatre away from the complex narrative pattern and showed the lyricism of the dance theatre to the maximum extent.

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Images of cover & back cover © Beijing People's Art Theatre

ISSN 2706-6967



PRICE: 10EUR