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AACIS Conference 2015

Modern Chinese Theater and the Alien Spectator on Stage

My paper examines the use of the foreign observer in modern Chinese theater. It surveys what I call the three moments of the development of the Chinese theater in the early twentieth century: the 1902 traditional theater reform and its repercussions, the Ibsenist theater movement from 1918 to the late 1920s, and the 1930s surrounding the publication of Cao Yu's *Thunderstorm*. By analyzing how the foreigner's perspective is appropriated and reinvented in the plays and the theater movements, I argue that modern Chinese theater's engagement with the alien spectator was instrumental in shaping intellectuals' evolving vision of the Chinese self, in both its theatrical experiments and social changes. The increasingly internalized foreign perspective in theater marks the confluence of the self with the other in the progress of Westernization, which transformed not only the socio-economic life but also the subjectivity of the individuals.

Modern Chinese drama was introduced to the stage after Western models in Japan in 1907, and reached its maturity in the dynamics of the May Fourth movement.¹ But the inception of a theater wedding Western themes and techniques with those of the Chinese is marked by an earlier moment, the theater reform at the turn of the century.² One of the first attempts to model traditional Chinese theater after the Western ideals was made by Liang Qichao. In 1902, Liang launched a traditional theater reform with three romance dramas (*chuanqi*) written by himself, resorting to Western characters and themes to critique Chinese social reality. Liang's efforts

¹ The birth of modern Chinese theater is generally associated with the founding of the first Chinese drama club, Spring Willow Society (*Chunliu she*), in 1906. See Yuan 431, and Chen, "Twentieth-Century Spoken Drama" 848.

² Late Qing intellectuals urged a nationalist reorientation of the theater, which is regarded by Xiaomei Chen as "roots of the Cultural Revolution" (*Acting the Right Part* 94).

helped open up a new phase for Chinese playwriting precisely by opening up the traditional theater to Western influences.

Critical responses to the call for a new theater echoed this agenda, advocating Western models and theories. It was inevitable that some displayed the problems of Chinese theater as the foreigners saw them. In 1904, Liang's journal, *New People Newspaper (Xinmin congbao)*, carried Jiang Guanyun's article, "The Chinese Theater" (*Zhongguo de yanju jie*), which, citing Japanese criticisms of Chinese theater, concludes that "the greatest defect in our theater is just what our detractors have pointed out, the absence of tragedy" (50-51). This observation was both new and daring, and had enduring impact on the cultivation of a tragic aesthetic in Chinese literary criticism. The same year saw the publication of China's first theatrical journal, the *Grand Stage of the Twentieth Century (Ershi shiji da wutai)*, pioneered by Chen Qubing and Wang Xiaonong. Chen Peiren's "On the Benefits of Drama" (*Lun xiju zhi youyi*), published in the first issue, begins with a recollection of the author's visit to Japan. Dressed after the Western style, he was belittled by the Japanese intellectuals who preserved their traditional attire, a symbol of national confidence and loyalty. He was further embarrassed because now in China, the traditional costumes were only preserved by, for example, Buddhists, Taoists, and the theater, a fact that, despite the article's somewhat wandering logic, makes clear his intention to solicit an external witness when justifying the importance of drama in promoting nationalism. Both articles claim to have glimpsed the nature of Chinese theater through the Japanese eye. Such reflections highlight the foreign reference in modern Chinese self-awareness. Meanwhile, foreign articles on Chinese theater were translated by journals and magazines to make the external perspectives more available to the domestic readership. When China was imitating the West both directly and

via Japanese examples, its intellectuals were constantly obsessed with the image of China as seen by its foreign models. Theater was just one example.

Liang's theatrical experiment also engaged the foreign observer. One of his *chuanqi* plays, *New Rome (Xin Luoma)*, presents the heroic deeds in Italian national rejuvenation. Liang has the play introduced in the prologue by the ghost of Dante, who, together with his friends Shakespeare and Voltaire, is going to China to watch the premiere. Prompted by the voice aside, which calls China a "sick nation in the East," Dante surmises that Liang's play expresses the concern for China's own rejuvenation (519). He thereupon withdraws, and as Liang's play was never finished or staged, it is unclear whether he intended these foreign figures to come out again. It invites one to ask why, in a play about a foreign nation's revival aimed at teaching the Chinese audience about nationalism, Liang must have three Western spectators on stage, while he retires behind the scenes. It is significant that he uses Dante, the literary inspiration for Italian Risorgimento, and that the three witnesses, as Haiping Yan points out, are "figures who were vital components of the nationalism, humanism, and rationalism which formed the cultural legitimacy of the modern West" (55). Their presence lends authority to Liang's play, but more importantly, they teach the Chinese audience how to read. As they are removed from the stage by their trip to China, they join the audience, yet they do not only watch *with* the Chinese spectator/reader, but look *at* the audience too, the people of a "sick nation." Their absence from stage makes them omnipresent overseers, who see to it that the Chinese see the play in a correct way, namely projecting nationalism coated in an Italian mantle onto China. These spectators from the overseas become the foreign guardians of the Chinese vision as theater reformers prepare their audience for ideas about reform or revolution with the new drama.

Liang himself was writing and publishing in Japan, therefore looking at his audience, the readers of *New People Newspaper*, from an alienated position, with all his Japanese readings and experience behind him. Before *New People Newspaper* Liang had run another journal, the *Disinterested Criticism (Qingyi bao)*, which featured substantial translation of Western and Japanese writings on China. This preoccupation with the foreigners' perspective Liang readily transferred to the stage, appealing to the Chinese awareness of being looked at by the other.

The real and imaginary foreign gaze thus accompanied the traditional theater reform from the beginning, spurring its onset and regulating its trajectory. If modern Chinese national consciousness, as Dorothy Ko argues, “is by definition transnational in reference; it originated from the gaze from the outside in” (31), then the reformed theater, born for the purpose of promoting such a national awakening, can be said to have a similar genesis: it originated from the foreign or foreign-educated spectators from the outside in.

[the greyed paragraphs will not be read out in full at the conference]

By the time the playwrights branched out a drastically new form, the modern spoken drama, the Chinese stage was more intricately intertwined with the foreign vision. The first Chinese spoken drama staged, *The Black Slave Cries out to Heaven (Heinu yu tian lu)*, was accomplished in 1907 with the guidance of Japanese theatrical artists (Sun 46). But a significant wave of theater reform did not rise until 1918, when the *New Youth (Xin qingnian)* issued an *Ibsen Special*, which published the American-educated Hu Shi's article, “Ibsenism” (*Yibusheng zhuyi*), together with three plays by Henrick Ibsen and a biography. Hu Shi's article is infused with the metaphor of disease and remedy; he insists that theater must open people's eyes to social evils. “The merit of Ibsen,” he writes, “is precisely that he tells the truth, that he faithfully portrays society's depravity and filthiness to let people observe carefully” (页码). This set the

tone for Ibsen's reception in China, and the social-critical tradition of modern Chinese theater. Years later, when Xiao Qian [Hsiao Ch'ien] looks back at China's enthusiasm for Ibsenique plays, he writes, "Ibsen is looked upon as a social surgeon rather than as a playwright. ... In those days, China was so hopelessly ill, that she needed a daring doctor capable of prescribing the most desperate remedies" (16). This foreign doctor-playwright did not have to look directly at China; he lent his lens to the Western-educated intellectuals to see.

One crucial matter they saw was the need to break away from the restraint of the family in pursuit of love and freedom, which they gleaned from *A Doll's House*, one of the three plays introduced in the *Ibsen Special*. The heroine Nora's awakened individualism became for the Chinese intellectuals the stimulus to defy patriarchal control, especially in the form of arranged marriage. The theater began to see numerous Chinese Noras struggling to leave the homes of their fathers and husbands, a tradition pioneered by Hu Shi's one-act play, *The Greatest Event of One's Life* (*Zhongshen dashi*), first written in English in 1919, in which the heroine Tian Yamei elopes with her Japanese-educated lover against her parents' will. Significantly, Tian acts upon receiving a note from her offstage lover, asking her to make decision on her own. The foreign-educated lover observes and points out the way, but like most of the Nora plays, this play does not care to follow up with what happens after the home leaving. The revelation of individualism has taken the entire spotlight, leaving the prospects a blind spot.

The next year Tian Han, then a student in Tokyo, wrote *The Spiritual Light* (*Lingguang*), in which the protagonists mention Nora in a self-referential way. The play explores the foreign-enabled vision in a post-individual liberation light. Gu Meili, a student in America, is worried that her boyfriend, Zhang Defen, who is bound for China to help victims of a drought, will consummate an arranged marriage. She falls asleep reading *Faust*, and dreams that

Mephistopheles from Goethe's play comes to show her a vision of the "Miserable Land," which turns out to be China undergoing famine and plague. When she wakes up, Zhang comes in to inform her that he has been freed from the betrothal the day before, and on hearing about her dream, urges that because their compatriots are suffering, "we must do something for them!" (93).

Like Dante in Liang Qichao's *New Rome*, Mephistopheles undertakes to enable the Chinese vision, but this time it is not to observe the vicissitudes of a foreign nation, or to remind the Chinese of being looked at by the foreign spectator; it is to awaken the diasporic intellectuals, who are like liberated Noras, to China's evils and disasters. Mephistopheles is summoned not as a soul-collecting devil but a visionary inspiration to take Gu "forth to new and varied being" (69), and eventually transcend personal entanglement to reach a grander landscape, the nation. But it is Zhang who interprets the dream for her, and points out to her, a student of literature, that she should employ her literary talent to relieve China's spiritual famine (*jingshen shang de jihuang*, 93-94). The play ends in a religious aura, where the lovers kneel to the image of Jesus in prayers, the light of the Holy Spirit pouring down on them (97-98). It portrays with confidence the Western inspiration for the retrospective quest of Chinese intellectuals, with the man pointing out the way, and shared the enthusiasm of many plays presenting the joint efforts of men and women devoted for the cause of the nation. This male-dominated discourse of national salvation was destined to be undercut by the gendered narratives of women who did not share the optimism of idealized comradeship. Since the May Fourth slogan of "equal rights for men and women" did not essentially change the secondary position of the female sex, women had to search for alternative beliefs to justify their very existence alongside the male pioneers.

In the same year when Ibsen was introduced to the Chinese reading public with great fanfare, a real-life Chinese Nora, no longer able to bear the oppression from her families, escaped to find shelter in Japan, and eventually made her literary contribution to the Ibsenist repertoire. Bai Wei, daughter of a Japanese-educated intellectual and runaway wife from a forced marriage, injected her grievances into her plays and novels. She wrote profusely about love, without necessarily subsuming it under the national discourse. Love, as Meng Yue and Dai Jinhua contend, “was no longer merely an emotional concept or theme, but the embryo of a more compassionate, subaltern, and resistant culture. It aims at providing the subaltern, i.e. the dominated, including women, with the cultural rationale for their existence” (22). Romantic love in particular sustained Bai Wei’s literary career. It is the theme and highest ideal of her expressionistic poetic drama, *Linli* (1925), in which the eponymous heroine claims unabashedly to be “born for love” (50).

Linli, the autobiographical projection of Bai Wei, is alienated from her nation and family, and estranged from her lover, who cannot share her zealous devotion to love. Looking back at China from a foreign country, she does not find the comrade or the confidence with which she can exhort to “do something for the nation.” What she finds is oppression and a profound sense of displacement. She cannot go back, for

Which man in China qualifies for a husband?

...

But now for the women in China,

Her family does not allow her financial support,

The society does not allow her space to develop.

...

You either end up being the seventh or eighth concubine
 Of the fat money bag,
 Or you are not likely to have a bowl of rice. (79)

Marriage is more oppressive because it is necessitated by the need for money, a fact not often considered by Chinese Noras. She cannot stay either, as to study the subject she dislikes is like “being married to a man against my will, and forced to sleep with him every night by a cruel mother-in-law” (80). She decides to leave again, without justifying the optimism of the male masters like Hu Shi, or relying on the guidance of her Japanese-educated lover.

In her dream, Linli and her lover are visited by the Goddess of the Purple Rose, who was born because “Venus slept for a night under the white rose in the rose garden, / Embracing the bud with her imagination and warm blood” (99), an image reminiscent of Oscar Wilde’s “The Nightingale and the Rose.” The Goddess grants the lovers visions of resplendent and grotesque scenes, all ending in death and destruction. The Goddess then accompanies Linli in her second dream, which ends in Linli’s departure with the Goddess to the other world and the cruel destruction of her lover. These visions, ostensibly initiated by a Goddess from Western literary tradition, are aptly framed in a dream and reveal the desperate heroine’s desire for destruction, as there is no way out. The alien visionary inspiration is used, therefore, very differently from how Mephistopheles is employed in Tian Han’s *The Spiritual Light*: instead of opening the individuals’ eyes to the need of the nation, the Goddess enables a vision of a hopeless self. Similar pessimism continued to feature in Bai Wei’s plays. In fact, her works are persistently obsessed with the vision of death and destruction, which made her a discordant note in the early 1920s, when the dominant discourse of enlightenment and desire for modernization blinded most intellectuals to Ibsen’s reflections on the illusions of the capitalist modern life (Zhang 54-55).

Bai Wei's escape and her publication of *Breaking out of the Ghost Tower* (*Da chu youling ta*) in 1928 bracketed the first decade of the Ibsenist theater movement, marking its surge and ebb. When Cao Yu began to conceive his first play in 1929, the conflicts intrinsic of Western modernity, which had often been ignored in the high tide of the May Fourth, had thrust out. After its successful premiere in Japan in 1935, *Thunderstorm* made a triumphant return to China and won immediate admiration. Critics found the play an inexhaustible generator of topics, especially about its fascinating characters. One character, however, did not attract scholarly attention, due perhaps to the fact that he remained off-stage. Yet not only is his name, Doctor Ke or Ke Daifu, mentioned repeatedly in three of the four acts, but his persistent presence in the house is crucial in sustaining the tension between the tyrannical patriarch and his oppressed family members.

Doctor Ke is first mentioned by Zhou Puyuan in Act One. Having forced his wife, Fanyi, to drink the bitter herbal soup supposed to cure her unverified disease, Zhou asks his younger son, Chong, to tell Fanyi that he has invited "Doctor Ke from Germany" to see her. "It seems to me," Zhou remarks, "that your mother is somewhat deranged and seriously ill" (68). Then turning to his elder son, Ping, he adds, "You seem no better" (68). He virtually diagnoses his wife and son with mental illness before the arrival of the doctor, asserting control through a pathological surveillance, which is among the causes of Fanyi and Ping's mental troubles. Zhou and the doctor reinforce each other's authority, the latter being, according to Zhou, a "famous expert in mental disease" (68).

The doctor's invisible presence becomes pressing in Act Two, where Fanyi, and the audience/reader with her, is reminded again and again by the servant Lu Gui of Doctor Ke's visit: he has been invited to come, has come, has been waiting. As Fanyi refuses to go, Zhou Puyuan

himself comes to urge her. On hearing Fanyi's defiant "I am not ill" (95), Zhou admonishes with forced patience, "Doctor Ke was my good friend in Germany, and a specialist in gynecology. You have some mental problem, and he is surely able to cure it" (95). By this we learn that the German doctor is not only an expert in neurology, but also one in women's diseases. But the logic behind Zhou's conclusion is hard to follow: what is the connection between gynecology and the ability to cure mental diseases? Is neurology gendered as feminine? Or rather, the woman with dispositions peculiar to her sex is pathologized by the patriarch's arbitrary power, which he demonstrates in the capacity of a deputy doctor. When Fanyi insists that she is not ill, Zhou responds coldly, "You make a scene in front of people, deny your illness, and refuse medical advice. What is that but a mental morbidity?" (95). The symptoms are listed and diagnosis given. Or rather, the symptoms are observed on a presumed diagnosis: Fanyi *is* ill but denies it, and therefore she is ill.

It does not really matter what illness Fanyi has contracted; it matters that by pathologizing Fanyi's behavior, Zhou can force her to medical treatment, and therefore to his physical and mental control. He consequently warns his servant, "Mrs. Zhou is now with serious mental disease," and asks them to watch her (96). This monitoring proclivity is further exposed when, in Act Three, Zhou asks Chong, who has so far seemed healthy and vivacious, if he has taken Doctor Ke's medicine after meal. With the unexplained sudden extension of the doctor's professional aegis, the medical discourse constructs a surveillance system in the house, the wife and children its in-patients. It is apt that in the prologue and epilogue the house has been turned into a hospital, for the atmosphere of an asylum is already there. This surveillance will not be complete without the panoptic gaze at the inmates furnished by the invisible German doctor. Chong's case in particular reminds the audience how much could happen behind the scenes, and

how much the doctor *sees*. He is expected to come everyday; he not only sees his patients, but oversees the Zhou family with his medical expertise, while his invisibility renders his gaze omnipresent, as that of the watchman from the inspection house in the panopticon.

It is significant that the off-stage doctor is a foreigner, who is at once outside the kindred and national constitution of the family, and inside the household with access to the most intimate corner, i.e. the mistress's bedroom. His infiltration into the family corresponds with the foreign penetration in China when *Thunderstorm* was written. Although Cao Yu seemed somewhat aloof to the Japanese military aggression in his plays of this period, he was sensitive to the pervasive influence of Western capitalism, which was to play a more crucial role in a later play, *Sunrise* (1935). In *Thunderstorm*, the presence of the foreign is announced in two capacities, Western medicine and capitalist industry. For an audience in the 1930s, the image of a Western-educated capitalist like Zhou Puyuan, and his foreign connections such as the German doctor, could not be more familiar. Germany was chosen apparently because of the prestige of its medical science: it had the most advanced medicine in the world, one that the Qing and Republican governments emphasized the most when they imitated the Japanese model in building up a modern medical system (Gao 175-80). Zhou the capitalist is a rather hybrid figure, a German returnee and mine-owner who rules his household with stern Confucian principles. His foreign education does not produce a reform-minded freethinker, but adulterates the residue of a corrupt tradition with lucrative Western values.³ One result of the assimilation of the West since the late nineteenth century was the blurred boundary between the traditional and the Western, the inside and the

³ Director Xia Chun talks about how his team designed Zhou Puyuan's costumes and furniture: "He may wear pajamas, but over Chinese-style underwear. ... His house is decorated with both Chinese paintings and oil paintings; with candlesticks from Germany and a shelf for [Chinese] antiques; with an intricate clock and an old-fashioned cupboard that Lu Shiping used thirty years ago, on which we had patterns of the Ming dynasty carved ..." (qtd. in Qian 266, note 2). This arrangement highlights the fusion of the Western and the Chinese traditional in Zhou's character.

outside, the self and the other. The ingested foreign was not always benevolent, and even the image of the Western doctor, so favored by intellectuals bent on curing the national diseases, can play the role of accomplice in oppression. Anxieties about the modern Chinese identity grew, feeding on the fact that the foreign observer did not only gaze from the outside in, but viewed China from the inside out.

This adulteration, again, wells over to seep into the tension around medicine. Fanyi has been forced to drink a bitter herbal concoction, simmered with ready ingredients Zhou has ordered, apparently according to a traditional Chinese prescription. After the doctor's arrival Fanyi is asked to continue taking medicine, but it is not clear if she will have to drink the same herbal soup. It will not be surprising if she does, for the Western doctor, after all, can be seen as a foreign double of Zhou. The oppression she bears like bitter medicine is a concoction of the examination from without with the inspection from within an alienated home.

Reinforced resistance to the Western influence would surge in theater as the anti-Japanese, anti-imperialist discourse gained momentum in the 1930s. But the real and imaginary foreign observers, who were invited to see and impart their visions to the late-Qing and early-Republican intellectuals, had not only shaped the way the Chinese looked at the self and its context, but also become an integral part of the subjective consciousness of individuals involved in the this performance art, and would continue to exert their influence even on the stage most hostile to foreigners, constructing self-images according to the dominant philosophy of the time. In the model theater, for example, instead of seeing a "sick nation of the East," these foreigners were appalled by the sight of a nation with surging military spirit and revolutionary heroes, just as what the Japanese officer Hatoyama sees the *Red Lantern* (*Hongdeng ji*).

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