Expressionism and Its Deformation in Contemporary Chinese Theatre

Yuwen Hsiung
INTRODUCTION:

After Cao Yu

Cao Yu 曹禺 (1910-1996) is the exemplary figure of modern Chinese drama. He acts, he writes, and he devotes his whole life to drama. Cao Yu’s significance is not only acknowledged by his long-term position as the president of the most prestigious theatre in China, Beijing People’s Art Theatre (Beijing renmin yishu juyuan 北京人民藝術劇院), but was immediately recognized in 1934 with the publication of his first play Leiyu 雷雨 (Thunderstorm). Written by Cao Yu at the young age of 24, Thunderstorm dazzled audience with its complicated plot, richness of dramatic techniques, and sophistication of ideas in portraying a tragically fated family. As one of the most frequently performed plays on the Chinese stage, Thunderstorm is hailed alongside the other two plays in his trilogy, Richu 日出 (Sunrise, 1936) and Yuanye 原野 (The Wilderness, 1937).1

The warm reception of Cao Yu’s initial dramatic works, nevertheless, did not extend to his third play, The Wilderness, this privilege of being embraced by the Chinese theatre critics at that time. The attack was blatantly straightforward, with The Wilderness marked as “incomprehensible” because of its adoption of expressionist techniques.2 Cao Yu’s personal bewilderment toward the attack upon The Wilderness was not erased until the early 1980s when the play received a resurgence of enthusiastic attention, aided by the flourishing of dramatic experiments following the Cultural Revolution (1967-1977). This brief account of Cao Yu’s The Wilderness is to show that this alternating rebuke and embrace that has followed this particular dramatic work is an example best illustrating the power struggle over Expressionism vs. Realism in modern Chinese theatre. In other words, the revenge story of The Wilderness became Cao Yu’s own story – that of a frustrated expressionist.

Expressionism, a term and movement almost too elusive to be well defined in the Western dramatic tradition, was open to massive re-introduction and flourishes in Chinese theatre until well into the 1980s. This book seeks to examine how Expressionism as a discursive locus was incorporated and even transformed during a critical phase in the modernization of Chinese drama. While various Western dramatic techniques made rapid appearance on the Chinese stage, Expressionism had been intentionally overlooked ever since Hong Shen’s Yama Zhao and Cao Yu’s The Wilderness were produced in the 1920s and
1930s. It is by no means incidental that Expressionism is re-introduced with such high enthusiasm when Chinese theatre reclaimed her agency during the post-Maoist era.

Expressionism’s emphasis on subjectivity in opposition to Realism’s pernicious insistence on mimicking objective reality is especially pertinent to the liberated spirit in post-Maoist theatre. Examining the transition from rejection to acceptance of Expressionism, we should not stop at asking questions about the change in attitudes, or how the grand narrative in the West has fostered mimetic discourses in contemporary Chinese theatre. What is more intriguing is how Expressionism has generated a dialectical space for the idea of a peculiarly Chinese Expressionism. That is, the appropriation of Expressionism becomes a contributing force for Chinese playwrights to resort to the traditional operatic theatre in order to find their voices, as well as their expressive modes. This book examines the significance of Expressionism during its second flourishing or comeback following the end of the Cultural Revolution up to the present. Each chapter closely examines six dramatists – Gao Xingjian 高行健, Lin Zhaohua 林兆華, Huang Zuolin 黃佐臨, Xu Xiaozhong 徐曉鐘, Meng Jinghui 孟京輝, and Lai Sheng-chuan 賴聲川 (Stan Lai) with their dramatic pieces staged from 1982 up to the present – by interrogating the expressive languages of their theatre. The influence of Expressionism on Chinese theatre has long been neglected, and there is only one book on this topic so far. Published in 2000, the book is entitled Biaoxian zhuyi yu ershi shiji Zhongguo wenxue 表現主義與二十世紀中國文學 (Expressionism and Twentieth Century Chinese Literature). It treats Expressionism as a static idea to be absorbed by Chinese novels, poetry, and drama. The aim is to go beyond previous scholarship that has not problematized the ways in which the political and the philosophical shape the aesthetic, ultimately projecting a situation that is deeply implicated in the negotiated concepts of epistemology, aesthetic, values, and identities. The project studies how Expressionism as a discursive locus is manipulated, stretched, and even deformed, representing a critical phase in the development of Chinese dramatic modernization.
CHAPTER ONE  
Expressionism Then and Now

The origin of the term Expressionism is itself controversial. Some argue that the French painter Julien-Auguste Hervé first used the word to designate his works in 1901, while others argue that it initially appeared on the cover of the journal Der Sturm (The Storm), which was devoted to the arts in Germany in 1911. Without a doubt, it rose in association with the field of painting in Germany, led by two artistic groups, Die Brücke (The Bridge) and Der blaue Reiter (The Blue Rider). To distinguish themselves from the impressionist’s meticulous eye, which was fixed on external reality, expressionist painters attempted to look beyond surface detail to bring the inner reality to light. The movement soon grew to be usefully applied to other forms of art, and manifested itself most vigorously in drama.

Expressionist drama in Germany, according to J. L. Styan, is a “drama of protest.” After the traumatic experience of World War I, playwrights protested against the hierarchy of social order as in Georg Kaiser’s (1878-1945) From Morn to Midnight (1917), against Capitalism as in Ernst Toller’s (1893-1939) Masses and Men (1921), as well as against the growing industrialization and the mechanization of human life. Inheriting the romantic spirit to emit the overflow of inner feelings on the one hand, and following Nietzsche’s glorification of the individual against constraints by God on the other, Expressionist drama was further intensified with the advent of Freudian and Jungian psychology with respect to presenting an individual’s inner experience through special dramaturgical devices, such as episodic scenes, nightmarish visions, distorted and exaggerated sets, telegraphic or poetic dialogues, and so forth. Although often regarded as quite short-lived, German Expressionism not only inspired later playwrights like Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), but also extended beyond its national boundary to other parts of the Continent, even reaching the United States.

Expressionism entered the dramatic scene in the American theatre during the 1920s. Disavowing their direct relationship with Kaiser and Toller, most American dramatists instead expressed their affinity with August Strindberg (1849-1912) – a Swedish playwright, later considered one of the forerunners of expressionist drama. They were additionally influenced by German expressionist art and film, particularly The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1919) directed by Robert Weine (1873-1938). American expressionist drama showed more interest in exploring the human psyche than in political reform and communist ideology as
German Expressionism did. Whereas drama to German expressionists is “a drama of protest,” to Eugene O’Neill (1888-1953) it is “a drama of souls.” Lacking the socialist agenda, O’Neill intended to present a penetration through the flesh of realistic conventions into the inner state of mind. Two of his prominent works, marking the burgeoning of Expressionism in the American theatre, were *The Emperor Jones* (1920) and *The Hairy Ape* (1921). Other significant playwrights contributing to the spell of expressionist drama in the American theatre are Susan Glaspell (1882-1948), Sophie Treadwell (1890-1970), Elmer Rice (1892-1967), and John Howard Lawson (1894-1977). Expressionist drama thrived mainly in the 1920s, but its attempt to portray subjectivity rather than the external reality, as well as its dramaturgical techniques, exerted an extraordinary influence upon later preeminent dramatists like Tennessee Williams (1911-1983) and Arthur Miller (1915-2005).

**Expressionism during the 1920s and 30s in China**

While the Continent and America witnessed the rise of Expressionism during the 1910s and the 20s, China underwent a series of radical changes both politically and culturally. Expressionism in the Chinese theatre is inseparable from the burgeoning period of modern drama that was deeply ingrained with realistic conventions when it was initially introduced. The end of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) not only enunciated the start of the Republican period, but also the beginning of the nation’s participation and competition in the international community. The nation was in the process of demanding political reforms. As a result, Western drama was regarded, on the one hand, as a renovating weapon for Chinese theatre to fight against the old, namely, the traditional operatic theatre, and as an educational channel to infuse new ideas to save the country on the other. Because of its reliance on spoken language, modern Western-styled drama is called spoken drama (*huaju* 話劇) in contrast to the traditional form, which is based on singing, dancing, and acrobatics, in addition to speaking. China’s cultural contacts with Western drama had already begun in the second half of the 19th century through missionary schools and foreign residents in urban centers like Beijing, Shanghai, and Tianjin. It is commonly held that the first modern Chinese play was performed in Tokyo by the Spring Willow Society (*Chunliu she* 春柳社, late 1906-1909), which was formed by overseas Chinese students. The play, *Heinu yutian lu* 黑奴籲天錄 (*Black Slaves Cry out to Heaven*), is an adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852). Chinese students used the themes of inequality and racism as a mirror to criticize the political deterioration and corruption in China.
It is not until 1919 that the first original modern Chinese play, Hu Shi’s 胡适 (1891-1962) Zhongshen dashi 終身大事 (The Greatest Event in One’s Life), in imitation of the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen’s (1828-1906) A Doll’s House (1879), appeared. Western educated, Hu Shi greatly admired Ibsen, whose realist drama was propounded as a way to arouse people’s attention to social issues. Before the May Fourth Movement in 1919, Hu Shi introduced the Chinese audience to Ibsen’s plays in the fourth volume of New Youth Journal (Xin qingnian 新青年), an established and influential journal at that time. He examined thoroughly Ibsen’s plays, such as A Doll’s House, Ghosts (1881), An Enemy of the People (1882), and so forth. “Ibsenism,” according to Hu Shi, refers to plays that were able to tackle the issues of society, family, and individual freedom in a realistic manner. Elizabeth Eide in China’s Ibsen: From Ibsen to Ibsenism proposes that what Chinese dramatists and scholars celebrated was not Ibsen but Ibsenism, which not only laid out the foundation for modern dramatic conventions in China, but came to symbolize a cluster of iconoclastic political ideas comprising female emancipation, liberation of the individual, and a critical attitude towards the existing social order. As Marston Anderson points out, for Chinese intellectuals, especially May Fourth intellectuals, “A sense of national crisis mandated their borrowing, and they approached their task with a keen sense of urgency, believing that China’s future rested on the models they chose.” On the Western stage, Ibsen brought to a climax the realistic movement of the nineteenth century. Yet as China’s political ideology drew itself more and more closely into line with Russia, Ibsen’s Realism succumbed to Naturalism on the Chinese stage. Naturalism is a branch of Realism or a selective Realism, emphasizing the sordid and pessimistic aspects of life. Based on Emile Zola’s theory of Realism and Belinsky’s emphasis on art as a reflection of life, “slice-of-life” drama was introduced to China during the 1930s by leftist writers. After Ibsen, the Russian playwright Anton Chekhov, undergirded by Stanislavsky’s acting method, became the dominant force within the realistic trend of Chinese spoken drama until the death of Mao and the overthrow of the Gang of Four in 1977.

It is against such a rampant realist trend that Expressionism was first introduced to China. Song Chunfang 宋春舫 (1892-1938) is the central figure contributing to the introduction of Continental expressionist drama. While Hu Shi brought Ibsen into China in the fourth volume of New Youth Journal, Song, coming immediately after, included five plays by August Strindberg and Frank Wedekind in the fifth volume of the same journal in 1918. Song’s later article “Deguo zhi biaoxianpai xiju 德國之表現派戲劇” (“German Expressionist Drama,” 1921) in Eastern Magazine (Dongfang zazhi 東方雜誌) provided a more systematic approach to Georg Büchner and Carl Sternheim, in addition to...
Strindberg and Wedekind. Song Chunfang argued that the significance of expressionist drama lies in its consciousness of protest, which is essential to Chinese society. He also pointed out its inadequacy:

Under illogical thinking, the dramatic plots do not match social reality. Characters in the play, like those in Kaiser’s, behave violently depending solely on emotions as if incapable of reasoning. From my viewpoint, they are either madmen’s or children’s likeness. Viewers might be moved by the conflicts in their action. Nevertheless, can they believe it actually exists in reality?

Taking its nature of protest and proletarian thought into consideration, German expressionist drama should have easily suited the need of China in its historical context, if not its aesthetics. Song Chunfang suggests that the problem of Expressionism resulted from its obsessions with techniques of excessiveness and abnormal deformation. Expressionist drama derives its energy from subverting the suffocating lines of logic and realist convention; Chinese intellectuals, contrastingly, tend to find its dramaturgical techniques unreasonable. Similar criticism can be detected in Liu Dajie’s 刘大杰 Biaoxian zhuyi de wenxue 表现主義的文學 (Expressionist Literature) written in 1928. Expressionists have a noble and healthy spirit, according to Liu, but could only generate inferior works of sickness, deterioration, and illusion. Liu’s book not only stands as the first complete book on Expressionism by a Chinese scholar, but serves as a concluding remark on the doom of Expressionism in China during its first introduction. Both Song and Liu exemplify their contemporaries, displaying two very interesting aspects of Chinese drama. First of all, their introduction reflects the Chinese intellectuals’ enthusiasm from the May Fourth Movement to the late 1920s when the Chinese quickly imported various Western ideas in order to renovate their society and culture. At the same time it reveals the difficulty of incorporating Expressionism into the prevailing trend of thought valuing science, reasoning, and Realism. Secondly, and more profoundly, their questioning of Expressionism is less a matter of preference than something entrenched within deeply rooted Chinese philosophical thinking and aesthetics. Expressionism’s distinctive grasp of the medium, in other words, is not as transparent and neutral as a simple dramatic technique, which will reveal itself as the essential issue of controversy when Expressionism reenters the Chinese theatre in the 1980s.

During the 1920s and 30s, there had been sporadic attempts to incorporate expressionistic techniques by Chinese playwrights, such as Yang Hui’s 杨晦 Lai ke 來客 (Visitor) in 1923, Bai Wei’s 白薇 Lin Li 琳麗 (Lily) and Guo Morou’s 郭沫若 Nie Ying 聂婴 (Nie Ying) in 1925, and Chen Chuhuai’s 陈楚懷 Kulou de milian zhe 骷髏的迷戀者 (An Obsesser with the Skeleton) in 1932. The existence of the influence of Expressionism seems most fully exemplified by Hong Shen’s 洪深 Zhao yanwang 趙閻王 (Yama Zhao, 1922) and Cao
Expressionism Then and Now

Yu’s *The Wilderness*, both of which were adaptations of Eugene O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones*, marking O’Neill’s initial success in the expressionist American theatre in 1920. Hong Shen’s *Yama Zhao* maintains the most apparent kinship with *The Emperor Jones*. Hong Shen was the only Chinese student ever admitted to Professor George P. Baker’s playwriting class at Harvard University from 1919 to 1920. In Hong Shen’s recount of his experience, he indicates an awareness of O’Neill’s previous attendance in the same class. It was through Baker’s class that O’Neill, who was there from 1914 to 1915, first came to learn about German theatre. It is apparent that both the German theatre and Eugene O’Neill are at the back of Hong Shen’s mind when he seeks inspiration for his own works. The American theatre around the 1920s further influenced Hong Shen while he was working for the Copley Square Theater in Boston, and later on in New York.

Shortly after he returned to China in 1922, Hong Shen wrote *Yama Zhao*, having heard soldiers talk about the mercenaries hired by warlords at that time. *Yama Zhao* is a tragic story about Zhao Da 趙大, an orderly of a battalion commander. Zhao is nicknamed Yama Zhao, meaning the King of the Underworld, obviously a Chinese version of the Negro “Emperor Jones” in O’Neill’s play. *The Emperor Jones*, however, develops around the central character, Brutus Jones. Having escaping from prison in the United States, Jones makes himself the emperor on a Caribbean island by enslaving the locals, who are on the verge of revolting against him. From scene two to scene seven, Jones flees into the forest, chased by those he oppressed and haunted by his immediate as well as his racial past. Geographically, he moves from a continent to an island, and then gets trapped within a forest on the island. A sense of enclosure is therefore presented through the narrowing down of space. Jones no long has any space to escape to, but instead is forced to face and take responsibility for his past actions. Much of the power of the play is transmitted to the audience by continuous drum beat, beginning at a pace of seventy-two per minute like our heart beat. Drum beat, working directly upon the audience’s faculties, create not only a tempo but also a condition, in which audience might feel that one’s heart beat is out of control as it follows the gradually increasing tempo of external beatings. The audience is forced into the realm beyond control, like Jones who gets lost in the black forest of hallucination. His mental images are visualized by the phantom characters from his past. His feeling of fear is further materialized by the Little Formless Fears of creepy shapeless figures on the stage.

O’Neill’s influence can be easily discerned in Hong Shen’s molding of the plot structure of *Yama Zhao*. Closely imitating the forest scenes in *The Emperor Jones*, seven consecutive scenes in a dark forest, from two to eight, are composed of Zhao’s soliloquies. After absconding with his and other soldiers’ pen-
sions illicitly kept by the battalion, Zhao escaped into the forest. Zhao sees and talks to the hallucinated characters from his oppressed experience, and even from his ancestors’ memories of the Boxer Rebellion. The play’s resemblance to *The Emperor Jones* is not only shown in the episodic structure of scene division and the visual treatment of subjective consciousness in the maze of dark forest, but also in several motifs of the play, such as the stolen money, the unfairness of past experience, the threatenings from gun shots, etc. Adopting the expressionist techniques in O’Neill’s play, Hong Shen is thus able to ask audiences not to judge the character based solely on his behavior. Hong Shen comments on his idea in *Yama Zhao*, “Good guy and bad guy are all made by his context.”

The audience enters into the protagonist’s hallucinating mind with sympathy and understanding. So we come to learn that Yama Zhao, forced by the turbulence of war, could do nothing but turn himself into a killer, as his nickname suggests. However, the reception of the 1923 play was negative: reviewers in newspapers, like *Jingbao* (Bright News) and *Zhonghua xinbao* (New China Courier), called Hong Shen “mentally ill,” because they felt disconcerted about the disorderly activities of the character in the play and Hong Shen’s frenetic performance as well. After this harsh criticism, Hong Shen avoided using expressionist techniques and engaged himself in the business of making realist movies. Abiding by the trend of Realism in his later films and drama, Hong Shen’s finest achievement was the 1924 production of *Shaonainai de shanzi* (The Young Lady’s Fan), an adaptation of Oscar Wilde’s *Lady Windermere’s Fan* (1892). It is an event that scholars now view as the beginning of a tradition of realistic performance art on the Chinese stage.

More than a decade after *Yama Zhao*, Cao Yu wrote another adaptation of *The Emperor Jones*, only to meet criticism as hostile as that which met Hong Shen. Moving between modern Chinese spoken drama and Western theatre, between Realist conventions and various innovative dramaturgical devices, Cao Yu made evident his advocacy for incorporating the versatility of Western dramatic techniques from his first play *Thunderstorm* in 1934, at a time when most Chinese writers were committed to Realist portrayals. Although often overlooked, what Cao Yu does so remarkably in *Thunderstorm* is to include a prelude and a finale. By preventing the audience from being too emotionally attached to the story, Cao Yu tries to insert a storytelling space termed *xinshang de juli* (the distance for appreciation), as he argues, to function like of the chorus in Greek drama. There is an astonishing parallelism between Cao Yu’s idea and Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt* (Alienation Effect), which, in fact, was proposed by Brecht a few years later than Cao Yu. Even more notable, in regard to Western theatre, is Cao Yu’s allusion to O’Neill’s works in his next