

The Modern and Postmodern Form of Chinese Theatre since 1949

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Abstract:

Chinese theatre can be divided into modern and postmodern forms since 1949. The modern form of Chinese modern theatre is undoubtedly influenced by Western realism and modernism, which takes the script and the literature as the centre, and introduces the theory of modernism. It is represented by plays such as *Tea House* and *Sang Shu Ping Chronicle*. The postmodern form of Chinese modern theatre is influenced by the Western postmodern drama and Chinese opera: it is represented by three directors, namely Lin Zhaohua, Mou Sen and Meng Jinghui.

Keywords:

Chinese modern theatre; modern form; postmodern form; Chinese opera

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, drama¹, along with fiction, poetry and prose, has been regarded as one of the four major literary genres. Initially, most attention was attached to scripts and their literary significance and playwrights held utmost importance. Later, with increasing attention on the dramatic and theatrical nature of drama, directors became the soul of drama, and the theatre morphology was thus evolving. However, Chinese modern drama history, according to the "trichotomy" of Chinese modern literature, is divided into three periods: the "seventeen years period", the "Cultural Revolution period" and the "new period". However, we believe that from the perspective of morphology,

¹ The Chinese drama has been divided into two parts, the modern drama and the Chinese opera. In this paper we only discuss the modern drama.

Chinese theatre since 1949 should be divided into modern form and post-modern form.

In the 1990s, two influential books of Chinese drama history were published: Ge Yihong's *Chinese Drama History* and Wang Weiguo's *Chinese Drama History*. Ge's book ended the discussion at the "seventeen years period (between 1949 and 1966)", while Wang further divided modern drama into two periods: the "seventeen years period" and the "new period". Since there was no serious development of drama during the Cultural Revolution decade, the "new period" thus becomes the focus of the discussion among drama historians. Since the new millennium, five major influential books about the history of modern drama were published:

1. Tian Benxiang's *Chinese Drama Art History*. This book explains the theatre in the "new period". Tian divides the "new period" into the "exploration theatre" in the 1980s, the "neorealism theatre" in the 1990s and the "co-existence of diversity" in the 21st century.

2. In *The Hundred Years History of Chinese Drama (Contemporary volume)*, the authors Huang Huilin and Gu Haihui argue that the "new period" theatre can be divided into the "exploration period" in 1980s, the "transitional period" in 1990s and the "co-existence of diversity" in the new century.

3. *The History of Chinese Modern Theatre*, written by Dong Jian and Hu Xingliang, is the most comprehensive and systematic history of Chinese modern theatre, including modern theatre, Chinese opera, opera, dance theatre, children's theatre, Chinese opera of ethnic minorities and modern theatre in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao. From the perspective of enlightenment reasoning and modern consciousness, the authors divide the "new period" theatre into the "golden period of 1980s" and "mediocre period of 1990s" and discuss in detail the features of Beijing style drama, Chinese exploration theatre, north-east style theatre and military background theatre.

4. *The Evolution of Chinese Modern Theatre*, written by Wang Xinmin, sustains the belief that the theatre before the Cultural Revolution was anti-realistic, a process from multiplex to single, while the theatre after the Cultural Revolution was the revival of realism and the rise of modernist theatre, a process from single to multiplex. Thus the theatre can be divided into biographical theatre, Beijing style theatre, Shanghai style theatre, north-east style theatre, experimental theatre and female theatre. Wang considers *Sang Shuping Chronicle* the maturity of Chinese theatre since the new era.

5. Fu Jin's *History of New China Theatre* integrates modern drama and Chinese opera by adjusting the structure of drama history and categorizing dramatists and drama from a viewpoint called "comprehensive drama".

Since 1978 the development of avant-garde theatre has been accelerating. At present, there are a number of monographies and doctoral papers that talk about avant-garde theatre: Chen Jide defines the avant-garde theatre from experimental, radical, logical and marginal perspectives in analysis of the productions of Lin Zhaohua, Mou Sen, Meng Jinghui, Gao Xingjian and Guo Shixing. Zhang Xiaoping analyzed avant-garde theatre from three angles: cultural background, ideological theme and artistic form. Zhou Wen analyzed the theatrical aesthetic of the mentioned directors of avant-garde theatre, namely Lin Zhaohua, Mou Sen and Meng Jinghui. Zhang Zhongnian also discussed these three directors and wrote about the development of experimental theatre in Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

The study of avant-garde theatre has just begun in China; there is still no convincing and precise definition of avant-garde theatre. Yet even so, we can notice from the above-mentioned papers that directors are stepping into the limelight in theatre research while the role of playwrights is gradually fading. This symbolizes the real transformation from modern form to postmodern form in Chinese modern theatre.

Therefore, we can divide Chinese modern theatre into modern and post-modern form: Modern form of Chinese theatre: script and literature significance are the core. It can be divided into two types: the first one created a realist illusion often based on political needs, represented by Lao She's *Teahouse*. Chen Zidu's *Sang Shu Ping Chronicle* represents the other type, which has made new attempts in the aspects of subject consciousness, artistic form and theatre noumenon. It creates a realistic illusion in a political unconscious state and then breaks the illusion by new drama forms such as stage technology, the alienation effect and so on. Therefore it can be called the fusion of realism and modernism.

Postmodern form of Chinese theatre: director and performativity are the core. It can be divided into three types: The first type is represented by Lin Zhaohua, similar to the work of Antonin Artaud, marked by the rebellious postmodernism and return to the tradition of Chinese opera. The second is represented by Mou Sen, similar to that of Jerzy Grotowski, marked by self-experimenting postmodernist lifestyles. The third is represented by Meng Jinghui, similar to that of Peter Brook, marked by Western style postmodern games.

The modern form of Chinese theatre, influenced by Western realism and modernism, centers on script and literature while introducing Western drama theories such as narrativity, de-familiarization, and expressionism. It can be divided into two types. One is influenced by realism. Three Western realism drama theories, namely Brunetiere's "theory of conflict of wills", John Howard Lawson's "social conflict theory", and William Archer's "theory of catastrophism" are among the most influential on theatre essence. These theories centre on the script creation and playwrights while the language of logocentrism is omnipresent. They consider literary significance as the foremost criterion when evaluating drama. Lao She's *Teahouse* is the representative of this realist theatre. The other is influenced by both realism and modernism. Modern theatre theories including Adolphe Appia's "symbolic stage design" and "ritual art conception",

Gordon Craig's "stage director theory", Bertolt Brecht's "narrative drama theory", and Meyerhold's "anti-illusion theatre theory" became theoretical sources for later Chinese theatre. However, due to the overwhelming status of realist drama, script and literary significance remain central and realism still prevails. A combination of realist and modernist theatre was thus created, represented by Chen Zidu's *Sang Shu Ping Chronicle*.

The modern form of Chinese theatre centers on script and literary significance and is often included as a part of literary history. Most Chinese scholars believe that literary history should be a structure focused on classic works, rather than on time sequences, and a literary value system for classics should be established². Some scholars believe that "the status of literary classics in the history of literature is very important as they deal with the fundamental problems of human spiritual life, both present and eternal and they can inspire and influence contemporary and future critics and writers"³. We can use two classic dramas, *Teahouse* and *Sang Shuping Chronicle*, to explain the modern form of Chinese theatre.

1. Realism theatre classic — *Teahouse*

Mao Zedong's *Speech at the Forum of Art and Literature in Yan'an* in 1942 had a great influence on Chinese literature, which gradually became a tool to serve politics, workers, peasants and soldiers. Under the influence of this ideology, there emerged three dominant types of scripts in drama, namely workers' script, peasants' script and soldiers' script. It was not until 1957 that a critique by Liu Chuan discussed the fourth type of script, a new drama focusing on political labels but reflecting people's real life. Lao She's *Teahouse* belongs to the fourth type and became a classic over time.

² Wu Xuan: *A Non-literary Proposition — An Analysis of the Limitations of the Chinese Concept Literature in Twentieth Century*, in: "Social Sciences in China", No. 5, 2000.

³ Huang Manjun: *Classics in Modern Chinese Literature: Recognition and Lasting*, in: "Social Sciences in China", No. 3, 2004.

First of all, we must admit that *Teahouse* was a reflection of political ideology. Its tendency to comply with politics was related to Lao She's use of drama aesthetics. Lao She wrote after its debut that "after watching *Teahouse*, you can understand why our life today is happy and therefore we should make our contribution for 'the Great Leap Forward' in all our work"⁴. It is clear that it represented the political ideology of the Great Leap Forward movement and showed that old China must perish. Despite its devotion to political ideology, it was still criticized: for example, Zhang Geng wrote that "Although Lao She hates old China, he is too nostalgic about some people in that time"⁵. Some critics even thought that Lao She was against the new society, judging by some nostalgic scenes, criticism for the de-privatization revolution and socialism written in his script. These criticisms led to the ban of *Teahouse* after its 1958 debut and the drama did not come into light again until 1979, when its value was greatly recognized. The fact that it was written to serve the political ideology, and yet was banned by the same ideology, is worth reflecting upon.

Secondly, *Teahouse* has a unique and eternal artistic charm. The artistic uniqueness is mainly manifested in its theme, language, and dramaturgy; it is even thought to be the paramount work of Chinese drama. *Teahouse* uses the method of "revealing political changes indirectly". Lao She reflected the changes in society through the changes in characters' lives, thus revealing political shifts⁶. The uniqueness of this drama is that, rather than describing big events directly, it does so through depicting characters coming into and leaving the teahouse and using their mouths to tell how things had changed. With regard to its dramatic language, the *Teahouse's* lines are extremely well written. As a representative of Beijing style theatre it not only excels at traditional action language – the language usually aiming at using conflicts to promoting the development of the plot – but also

⁴ Lao She: *The Discussion of 'Teahouse'*, in: "China Youth Daily", April 4, 1958.

⁵ Zhang Geng: *The Discussion of 'Teahouse'*, in: "People's Daily", May 27, 1958.

⁶ Lao She: *The Answer of Several Questions Concerned 'Tea House'*, in: "Script", No. 5, 1958.

employs vivid ordinary life dialogues to bring characters to life. Take the first scene for example: of all the twenty three characters involved, except Wang Lifa and Chang Siye, have only two or three lines at most, yet these few lines build up characters and their stage actions. Through the languages and humor of these ‘nobodies’, the spectators can perceive their intertwined connections to the imperial court, government officials, villains, fortune tellers and human-traffickers, as if they were located within that old traditional Beijing teahouse. Thirdly, with regard to its dramaturgy, the traditional “conflict theory” seems to be ineffective in *Teahouse*. Instead, it uses a way of displaying characters to promote plot development. In the history of Chinese and Western theatre, there has been the tradition of “one person to one matter”, but *Teahouse* has a multitude of characters. In this play, main characters sit throughout while peripheral characters come and go just as needed. Although the conflicts are not concentrated, as some minor conflicts are placed in the background, the drama still presents a profound sense of theatrical style and Beijing style. *Teahouse* has proved its unique dramaturgy and artistic value through its use of temporal background and highlighted narration of “nobodies”.

2. Realism and modernism — *Sang Shuping Chronicle*

After 1978, Chinese literature began a new chapter. In the field of drama, a discussion about theatrical view was launched. This discussion originated from Huang Zuolin, who proposed to integrate theories such as Stanislavski’s “producing life illusion — realistic”, Brecht’s “getting rid of life illusion — “free style” and Mei Lanfang’s “fusion of realistic and free-style”. Subsequently, many scholars got involved in the discussion, talking about the separation and integration of “realistic” and “free style”. The discussion never reached any conclusion, yet dramatists and scholars developed a consensus: theatre must return to the art noumenon. Theatre exploration in the early 1980s was based on this consensus. A large number of experimental plays, such as *Why am I dead?*, *Absolute Signal*, *Station*, *WM*, *Magic Cube*, *Death Visits the Living*, *B on the Wall Visits* and *China Dream*

were created. These theatre explorations, clearly an imitation of Western modern theatre, failed to create a masterpiece, yet they embodied both the philosophical thinking of human beings and innovation in theatre forms. The awakening of the subject consciousness, the innovation of theatrical means of expression and the return of theatre noumenon brought by these experiments were widely recognized and a masterpiece was then created following these explorations: *Sang Shuping Chronicle* (1988). The drama marked the peak of the modern theatre in the new period.

Cao Yu commented after watching *Sang Shuping Chronicle* that “[i]f we had more plays like this, we won’t have a theatre crisis”⁷. Theatre theorist Mr. Tan Peisheng wrote: “Over the past decade, Chinese dramatists have explored in two directions: stage language and the essence of human beings. The two directions were taken sometimes separately and sometimes together. In a sense, *Sang Shuping Chronicle* is a successful fusion of the two explorations”⁸. If we look back at the “Sang Shuping phenomenon” more than twenty years ago⁹, we believe that the greatest success of this classic work is to achieve the perfect blending of realism and modernism under the state of political unconsciousness, such as the combination of dramaturgy and narrativity, emotional resonance and estrangement effect, realistic and free style, presentation and representation, reality and super-reality.

Firstly, on the combination of dramaturgy and narrativity: the dramaturgy engages the reader or audience into dramatic conflicts to produce an emotional resonance, while the narrativity takes the audience out of the drama, leading to an estrangement effect between the subject – the people and the object – the characters. The emotional resonance and estrangement effect together enhance people’s spiritual and emotional experience. This is the

⁷ Cao Yu: *The Discussion on ‘Sang Shuping Chronicle’*, in: “People’s Daily”, March 23, 1988.

⁸ Tan Peisheng: *The Comment on ‘Sang Shuping Chronicle’*, in: “Literary Newspaper”, March 12, 1988.

⁹ Ding Tao: *The future of Drama – the significance of the ‘Sang Shuping Chronicle’ to modern theatre*, in: “Guang Ming Daily”, Jul. 15, 1988.

estrangement effect as Brecht describes it, whereby: “what audiences see on the stage is not unchangeable or cannot be influenced or cannot be decided. They are facing the presented human world and thus getting a standing point. This standing point is what he ought to have as a person in this era”¹⁰. This standing point is a politically unconscious state. However, *Sang Shuping Chronicle* did not use the extreme state of estrangement advocated by Brecht. Rather, this play employed Brecht’s way to break through the limitations of illusionist theatre form, and achieved emotional resonance and aesthetic experience through dramatic conflicts.

Secondly, on the combination of realism and free style: *Sang Shuping Chronicle* gave a perfect presentation of both realism and free style. There are many surprising episodes in this play, of which hunting becomes a ritual, and it produces a large number of poetic images. As its director Xu Xiaozhong wrote: “It does not create life illusion on the stage, but through the catalysis by symbolic images, it creates a regenerated poetic image rich in philosophical thoughts through the audience’s psychological synaesthesia and artistic synaesthesia; a complete vocabulary of symbolic imagery should be a philosophical one and embodied as an image of philosophy. Therefore, the poetic imagery may trigger the excitement of the audience in terms of philosophical thinking and aesthetic appreciation at the same time”¹¹. This philosophical thinking comes from the reality of both material and spiritual poverty and explains why the characters in the play brutalize each other under the feudal concept, family hierarchy and male dominance.

Therefore, the great achievement of *Sang Shuping Chronicle* is creating illusions by means of realism and breaking the illusions through narrativity, free style, estrangement effect, expressionism and other approaches. This play completes and concludes the modern form of Chinese theatre.

¹⁰ Bertolt Brecht, trans. by Ding Yangzhong: *The Drama Discussion by Brecht*, China Theatre Press, Beijing, 1990, p. 63.

¹¹ Xu Xiaozhong: *The evolution of compatibility and integration – an experimental report on the theatre ‘Sang Shuping Chronicle’*, in: “Drama Newspaper”, No. 4-5, 1998.

If *Teahouse* is a realist theatre classic, which uses political ideology as a political asylum, *Sang Shuping Chronicle* takes a further step from the basis of realism and becomes a classic play by integrating realism and modernism. These two classics may be criticized for their political factors, but it is these factors that make them insurmountable classic representations of the modern form of Chinese modern theatre. What is more, as Chinese theatres approach more mature postmodern forms, these two plays may find their position in the modern form of Chinese theatre, as irreplaceable and eternal.

2.1. Between postmodernism rebellion and return to traditional Chinese opera

The postmodern form of Chinese modern theatre is mainly influenced by Western postmodern drama and Chinese opera. Western postmodern drama refers to playwrights, including Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Harold Pinter, Jean Genet, Edward Albee, Tom Sheppard and others, whose plays usually show no discernable, singular theme, no plot, no logical or linear structure, and are considered anti-drama; and it also refers to theorists, including Artaud's "cruelty theatre", Jerzy Grotowski's "poor theatre", Peter Brook's "intuitive theatre", Schechner's "environmental theatre", and Augusto Boal's "theatre of the oppressed". These emphasize the openness of theatre, audience participation, the anthropological significance of the performance. The postmodern theatre, generally speaking, has three characteristics: non-linear play writing, play deconstruction and anti-grammar, as posited by Professor Jürgen Hoffman of the Berlin University of the Arts¹². This observation fits perfectly to explain the postmodern form of Chinese modern theatre represented by three directors: Lin Zhaohua, Mou Sen and Meng Jinghui. At the same time, perhaps influenced by the fact that Brecht, Artaud, Grotowski, Brook and Schechner all turned their attention to oriental theatres, or perhaps because of the inborn influence of Chinese opera and its traditional cultural spirit, the

¹² Cao Lusheng: *Foreign Post-Modern Art*, Jiangsu Art Press, Nanjing, 2002, p. 14.

three Chinese directors all inherited and developed traditional Chinese opera performance intentionally or subconsciously. If we call this the “second Westward trend”¹³, then it is clearly different from the first Westward trend, which totally denied Chinese opera. These directors, instead of discarding Chinese opera, embrace it and try to find the fitting point in combining Western postmodern theatre (modernism plays included) and traditional Chinese opera from artistic and aesthetic perspectives.

Since then, the Chinese modern theatre has not only learnt from the Western postmodern theatres, but also cultivated traditional Chinese opera performance and its cultural essence through the guideline of “adapting the past to serve the present and adapting foreign techniques to serve China”. Moreover, the postmodern form of Chinese modern theatre no longer centres on the script and literariness, but on director and performativity. Chinese modern theatre has truly become the art of performance rather than the art of language. Therefore, it is not the same as the modern form of theatre, which has been regarded a part of literary history. Instead, Chinese modern theatre now has a history independent from the history of literature.

Lin Zhaohua, China’s Artaud, initiated a postmodernism rebellion and returned to tradition Chinese opera. Lin Zhaohua had always denied that he was avant-garde or postmodern: “Some people say that I am ‘avant-garde’, ‘experimental’. In fact, it is wrong, I am a moderate reformist.”¹⁴ His use of modern theatre techniques, such as symbolism, expressionism, futurism, surrealism and postmodernist dramatic methods, such as non-linear play-writing, play deconstruction and anti-grammar action, all pointed to the performance tradition of Chinese opera and its cultural essence. Three plays, *Absolute Signal*, *Station* and *Savage* made Lin famous in the 1980s. The plays were written by Nobel Literature Prize laureate Gao Xingjian

¹³ Ma Sen: *The Two Westernization of China Modern Theatre*, Taiwan Culture Life and New Learning Press, Taipei, 1991.

¹⁴ Lin Zhaohua: *The Vitality of Theatre*, in: “Literature & Art Studies”, No. 3, 2011.

and showed strong literariness, yet Lin managed to push acting to its peak for the first time in Chinese modern theatre.

To begin with, Lin Zhaohua reduced the “god” status of the playwright in the theatre, making the stage no longer the place for the expression of the playwrights’ will but a free place to create. For example, when directing *Wild Man*, Lin Zhaohua only trained actors on their body expression and singing. Actors were encouraged to use their own understanding of the original state of life and improvise freely on the stage (using melody, body expression, dancing and other aspects). This was obviously similar to Artaud’s “cruelty theatre”: “Theatre, an art of independence, in order to resurrect or live, must be aware of the difference between the text, pure discourse literature, and what distinguishes it from other set ways of hand-writing.”¹⁵ Stage performance was everything and the stage was the soul for Lin Zhaohua, to the point that he even thought that theatre of the future must return to the origin of theatre by having acting at its centre, with stage performances first, coupled with other factors to create multiple possibilities for modern drama; and that is the soul of the theatre. Secondly, with playwright the “god” gone, Lin Zhaohua tried to create a new stage image and body language. Chinese modern theatre had always been based on dialogues with literary language at its core. But Lin Zhaohua used a large number of static long shots in the *Absolute Signal*, enabling the audience to see the psychological monologue through body languages. Also he used elements ignored by traditional theatre, such as posture, pantomime, gestures and sounds to show the unique beyond-language expressiveness of theatre. Finally, just as Artaud eventually returned to Balinese Theatre in the East, Lin Zhaohua returned to traditional Chinese opera. Lin Zhaohua had always been advocating the way of traditional Chinese opera. The temporal and spatial variation of the Chinese opera stage was created by

¹⁵ Antonin Artaud: *The Theatre and Its Double*, trans. by V. Corti, Cald&Boyards Press, London, p. 106.

acting: “time and space changes come from the actors”¹⁶. Through studying traditional Chinese opera, theatre performance can break the “the fourth wall” and create a full theatre effect.

Judging from the above, Lin Zhaohua was not only a “Chinese Artaud”, but also the first modern Chinese director. He combined various techniques of Western modernist theatre; used the vision of postmodern theatre theories on stage, actors and performance; made the playwright, director and actor equal, and adapted the traditional Chinese opera, applying it to the theatre. He rebelled against both postmodernist deconstruction of art and traditional stage spaces, together with its focus on scripts, and he finally achieved the return to Chinese art spirit. However, due to his failure to fully recognise postmodernism, Lin, in his later days, made a u-turn from postmodernism as he started to pay more attention to Beijing Opera and its traditional spirits. His later directing works, including *Birdman*, *Restroom* and classics adaptations such as *Hamlet*, *Three Sisters*, *Waiting for Godot*, *Old Tales Retold* and *The Master Builder*, had their own characteristics and showed some traits of innovation; yet they failed to show enough freshness and innovation and he was thus gradually surpassed by new-generation directors.

2.1. Mou Sen, “China’s Grotowski”, a self-experimenting postmodernist

Mou Sen was an independent and unique director of Chinese modern theatre. Except his only commercial and artistic failure, *Confide*, his entire directing work was real experimental theatre, which distinguished him from Lin Zhaohua and Meng Jinghui. More importantly, his experimental approaches, his concept of theatre and even his lifestyle were similar to Grotowski’s.

In his experimental approaches, Mou created the “frog troupe” and “drama workshop”. His famous plays, including *Rhinoceros*, *The Other Shore*, *Zero File* and *Something About AIDS* were performed by his allies and followers.

¹⁶ Lin Zhao: *The Exploring Theatre*, Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House, Shanghai, 1986, p. 98.

In these plays, the performance was no longer produced in the traditional way (with director giving instructions and actors performing accordingly), but in a way that both the director and the actors engage themselves in exploring, experimenting and performing together. This pure experimental approach won great acclaim: “Mou Sen’s ‘frog Troupe’ as the beginning of folk theatre experiment has become an indispensable part of Chinese modern theatre. It is because of them that Chinese postmodern theatre can develop from the trial in early 1980s to the revival in 1990s”¹⁷. Mou’s experiments were similar to that of Grotowski’s “theatre of 13 rows”. Grotowski asked the actor to be “holy”: “an actor must be good at creating his own voice, gestures and psychoanalysis language, just like when great poets create their own text language”¹⁸. Obviously they thought this kind of theatre was not for the public, because the presence of general audience would violate the sanctity of the theatre and an ideal audience was thus required. The ideal audience in Mou’s mind was of theatre experts from art festivals. His *Zero File* and other works had won numerous honors in nearly twenty art festivals around the world yet had not found success with mainstream audiences.

In his methodology, Mou, like Grotowski, completely removed scripts and other factors and focused on actors and audience only. The script for *Zero File* was just a poem; he gave up script when directing *Something About AIDS*, insisting that “the people who take part are being themselves, doing their own business, saying their own words, showing their own state of life, and expressing their own life attitude”¹⁹. The reason behind this was that he wanted to experiment with Grotowski’s “poor theatre” or “original theatre” as he claimed, meaning that “the theatre is independent. It is an art form with a self expressive language system. It is not an explanation or interpretation for literature or other arts, nor is it an attachment to

¹⁷ Ma Wenqi: *Postmodernism and Modern Theatre*, China Society Press, Beijing, 1994, p. 226.

¹⁸ Jerzy Grotowski: *Toward A Poor Theatre*, trans. by Wei Shi, China Theatre Press, Beijing, 1984, p. 25.

¹⁹ Mou Sen: *Writing on the Drama List*, in: “The Art World”, No. 3, 1997.

literature or other arts”²⁰. Grotowski argued that the essence of theatre was the relationship between the actors and the audience and Mou built a perfect practice on this belief.

Grotowski developed theatre into a ceremony, “an art as a vehicle”. He changed art into a contemporary way of life, claiming that the performers were no longer just performing for others but for enhancing themselves: “‘Performer’, with a capital letter P, refers to a person who acts. He’s not someone who plays another person; instead, he is a doer, a priest, a warrior. He is outside the aesthetic style”²¹. Mou did not go so far as to regard theatre as religion or yoga, yet he believed that theatre was a way of life: “We choose theatre as our way of life. In addition to the meaning of ourselves, we hope that our performances can enrich our audience’s aesthetic and emotional experiences. We are also constantly going through sublimation and purification like religion. In the process of sublimation, we pass the light of our own lives to the audience through theatre”²². The general audience did not accept Mou’s theatre experiment. Therefore, the greater value for the theatre experiment was to let performer experience an artistic life style. This way of life had gradually been recognized, even practiced in a variety of social performance fields.

To summarize, as a loyal follower and practitioner of Grotowski, Mou Sen’s postmodern spirit of self-experimentation stirred excitement in his contemporaries. However he quitted his directing career after the failure of *Confide* in 1997. Although in recent years he has appeared occasionally as literary consultant or event organizer, he has lost his vigour as a pioneer.

2.2. Meng Jinghui, China’s Peter Brook: a Western style postmodern game

Unlike Lin Zhaohua and Mou Sen, who had always denied their label as avant-garde artists, Meng Jinghui always considered his theatre avant-garde,

²⁰ Mou Sen: *What ‘Confide’ means*, in: “Drama film news”, July 3, 1997.

²¹ Jerzy Grotowski: *Performer*, trans. by Cao Lusheng, in: “Theatre Arts”, Nr. 2, 2002.

²² Wang Jifang: *The interview of Mou Sen*, in: “Lotus”, Nr. 2, 1999.

due to his inclination toward the West and postmodernism. He started his career as an actor in Eugene Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*, directed by Mou Sen in 1987. Later, he directed Harold Pinter's *Lifer*, Ionesco's *Cantarice Chauve*, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Jean Genet's *Balcony*, and became a well-known director in China. His later directing works fell into three types: the first was an exploration of theatre aesthetics, such as *I Love XXX*, *Flower in the Mirror*, *Moon in the Water* and *Head Without Tail*. These were postmodern language games, stage games and symbol games. Another was social theatre focusing on mainstream lifestyle such as *Rhinoceros in Love*, *Amber* and *Affair*. These plays, created by aesthetic principles developed from experimental theatre, showed little innovation in terms of art form yet were extremely popular with the public. The third type was confrontational theatre, against the mainstream, such as *The Accidental Death of an Anarchist* and *Two Dogs' Opinion on Life*. Initial motives for this "confrontation" were not simple, but the confrontation itself was positively received by the audience because the public could see other possibilities of life in his plays. Meng was successful in presenting a playful and entertaining atmosphere for Chinese modern theatre through his humorous, ironic, romantic set-up and techniques such as parody, collage and repetition. In his methodology, Meng Jinghui consciously imitated modern theatre master Peter Brook.

On "Deadly Theatre", Meng Jinghui imitated the first chapter of Peter Brook's book: *The Empty Space*, and wrote a paper: *Deadly Theatre around Us*. Meng explained his view of "Deadly Theatre" through five examples in National Centre for the Performing Arts, Beijing People's Art Theatre, avant-garde trying, independent production and college play. He wrote "deadly theatre is equal to inferior theatre, boring theatre and mediocre theatre"²³. This corresponded with the categories of Deadly Theatre, Holy Theatre, Rough Theatre and Immediate Theatre as proposed by Peter Brook. Meng Jinghui shared with Peter Brook the aim to create intuitive theatre; they held the same belief that theatre, though different in content, should be rid of other elements including script, language, politics, and

²³ Meng Jinghui: *The archives of Avant-garde Theatre*, New Star Press, Beijing, 2010, p. 75.

religion. Even dramatist, actor, audience and critics were leading to the deadly theatre. Thus, where Lin Zhaohua and Mou Sen considered very carefully the relationship between the actors and the audience, Meng was extreme in that he need not consider the audience, because he, just like Peter Brook, was mostly concerned about his own intuition.

On space consciousness on stage, Meng talked about his intuition: "As a space, anything can happen on stage. A person walking past is theatre. The key is how you can make the space more free, like birds flying in the sky. So I think theatre is the most free form of art"²⁴. This statement was a replica of the first sentences of Peter Brook's *The Empty Space*: "I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged"²⁵. For Meng Jinghui and Peter Brook theatre should be this simple and free, but the dramatist, actor, director, audience and critics and too much non-artistic elements, like political and religious ones, were involved in the development of theatre. In this sense, the postmodern theatre was to leave out of the theatre these irrelevant elements and acquire new artistic vitality.

"Postmodern games" were the core of "Meng's thrill". This "game" was achieved by parody, collage and repetition. As Meng wrote in the fore pages of *Si Fan*: "The performance form of this play is of great uncertainty for the performance is improvised; the estrangement of gameful virtual world and reasoning; passionate performing and calm viewing; all these greatly expand theatre space". Likewise, we can read in Peter Brook's *The Empty Space* that "a theatre is a game". Although Peter Brook did not use terms such as uncertainty, improvisation, virtualization, estrangement effect, and other postmodern vocabulary in his book, many things that Meng wrote about reflected Peter Brook's intention.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 122.

²⁵ Peter Brook: *The Empty Space*, trans. by Xing Li, China Theatre Press, Beijing, 2006, p. 1.

Sadly, after *Rhinoceros in Love* and *Pirate Faust* in 1999, Meng Jinghui has gradually shifted toward commercial theatre. Although he claims that he is still practicing avant-garde theatre, it is obvious that he prioritizes catering for the market and pleasing the audience.

It is reasonable that we think Lin Zhaohua, Mou Sen and Meng Jinghui are like Artaud, Grotowski and Peter Brook in China respectively. Artaud, Grotowski and Peter Brook echoed each other in terms of theatre beliefs. Artaud marked the distinction between modernism and postmodernism in Western theatre; Grotowski's theatrical experiments were obviously influenced by Artaud; and Peter Brook, after communicating with Grotowski, immediately became his follower. Their relationship was similar to that of Lin Zhaohua, Mou Sen and Meng Jinghui. Lin was the first director in Chinese modern theatre; Mou used to participate in his "theatre studio" and make self-experiments while Meng started his own way of exploring theatre after participating in Mou's "frog troupe". On top of that, Lin, Mou and Meng all shared some coincidental or deliberate connections with their Western mentors on theatre concepts and ways of directing. However, to our disappointment, all three talented directors failed to persevere with pure theatre art due to commercialization and marketization. Though their choices cannot be simply denied, the question of where the future is after postmodernism remains the biggest concern for the three directors and the entire theatre world.

Conclusions

We can reach two conclusions from the above discussion of modern form and postmodern form in Chinese modern theatre:

The first conclusion is that Chinese modern theatre has evolved from modern to postmodern form, as chiefly reflected in two respects. Firstly, the explanation of theatricality is from literariness to theatricality, and then to performativity. The first and most comprehensive exposition of theatricality since the new period is Qian Peisheng, who wrote "theatricality is to take actions in a hypothetical

situation, and the situation can produce suspense and lead to conflicts; and audiences, attracted and guided by this suspense, can understand the nature of the character and character relationship through causal-result actions”²⁶. Actions, conflicts, situations and suspense are the core of theatricality. This statement based itself on hypothetical situations and was clearly talking about the essence of traditional realist theatre, namely the creation of realistic illusions. On this basis, Dong Jian pointed out that there were two kinds of theatricality²⁷. One was “dramaturgy” in literary components, which focused on the spiritual aura and the internal part with human thinking and language as the embodiment and showed as concentrated, intense and complex. The other was the “theatricality” in stage presentation, which focused on the material, physical, external part with human body and voice as the embodiment and showed as open, highlighting, proper exaggerating and transforming. On top of these statements, we argue that there is a third kind of theatricality: “Postmodern performativity”. Performativity is not to emphasize the theatricality but to break the limits in the theatre, break the separation of actors and the audience, break the traditional relationship between actors and audience, and even let the audience enter a postmodern performing state.

Performativity “is a characteristic of speech act, and the performativity of language depends on certain social norms and rituals”²⁸. Jacques Derrida argued performativity connoted deconstruction, split the link between words and objects and de-constructed the dominance of logocentrism. Judith Butler noticed that performativity constituted social performance norms based on gender. For dramatic art discussion, performativity not only has these linguistic, philosophical and feminist meanings but also serves a more important function, that is the introduction of theatre art into daily life: theatre is no longer a sacred art, but a way of life for ordinary people.

²⁶ Tan Peisheng: *The Dramatic*, Peking University Press, Beijing, 1981, p. 291.

²⁷ Dong Jian: *The Brief Comment of the Dramatic*, in: “Theatre Arts”, No. 6, 2003.

²⁸ Richard Schechner: *Performance Studies: An introduction*, Routledge Press, New York, 2002, p. 110.

Secondly, we can witness the transformation from the awakening of subject consciousness to the individual self-consciousness in the change of Chinese modern theatre. Since the new period, the awakening of subject consciousness was credited the noble value of pursuing modernity. Literary and artistic fields were also more concerned about the imagination, memory, psychology, and sub-consciousness of the subject. It had a great influence on Chinese theatre in the new period, during which there had been a surge of new realism. But this subject-consciousness still belonged to group-consciousness. The theatre was still dominated by playwrights, scripts and their literariness, mostly the reflection of group-consciousness. In this stage, directors, actors and the audience were passive and spontaneous receivers of this subject-consciousness.

When the director and performativity became central, especially when performativity made theatre art part of people's daily life, along with dramatists and critics, all other subjects including the director, actors and audience became active because each individual could consciously display their individual consciousness. The director can become an actor through exchanges and discussion with the actor; the actor can become a director through improvisation, the audience can become actors through participating in the performance. Each individual can enjoy free art or a free state like art through their individual consciousness and performance experience. This can even expand into people's daily life such as sports, lectures, games and other social performance fields. From breaking the "fourth wall" to breaking the boundaries between actors and the audience, to introducing theatre into daily life, the stage opens up from a closed state and eventually points to the future of theatre, where there is no need for any stage because our human society is a big stage.

The second conclusion: morphology is an effective approach to study Chinese theatre. The division of Chinese modern theatre into modern and postmodern form is only one branch in the morphology of the entire Chinese drama family. It aims to make a general description of Chinese

modern theatre from the perspective of morphology. The Chinese drama family also includes Chinese opera, opera, dancing, folk opera and other styles, and each style can be divided into many forms or styles. We believe that each form or style deserves the same respect and equal status. When it comes to Chinese modern theatre, we propose this theatre morphology because we hope that, after reflection upon concepts like literature evolution, modernization and nationalization, we can build a good ecological environment for arts and we can realize the pluralistic coexistence and equal development of Chinese modern theatre.

The concept of literary evolution came into being in the early twentieth century and its theoretical elaboration started with drama. Wang Guowei advocated the idea that every generation had its own literature in order to explore the artistic value of Chinese opera. However, in opposition to Chinese opera, Hu Shi suggested that we must adapt Chinese opera and study Western theatre. Hu's concept became a mainstream idea within Chinese theatre since the "May Fourth Movement" and set Chinese theatre on the road of modernization.

Through the process of social modernization in China, this kind of thinking had never been doubted. Consequently, Chinese theatre has lost its unique art standard and art value given the overwhelming pressure of national state modernization. Chinese theatre also developed a modern history view under modern expressions like enlightenment reasoning and modern consciousness. At the same time, in the context of the modernization and nationalization of literature, some scholars have further explained the course of modernization of Chinese theatre²⁹, and proposed the concept of "modern national drama"³⁰. We believe that grand concepts such as literary evolution, modernization and nationalization are not describing modern Chinese theatre as an art itself because they fail to analyze and summarize

²⁹ Dong Jian: *Chinese Theatre in Twentieth Century*, in: "Literary Review", No. 1, 1998.

³⁰ Hu Xingliang: *Chinese Theatre and Tradition of Chinese Opera*, in: "Social Sciences in China", No. 1, 2001.

the theatre art from aesthetic viewpoint. Exclusive artistic view and methodology bring more harm than good; therefore we should divide Chinese modern theatre into modern and postmodern form from the perspective of morphology. Such categorization not only enables us to understand the changes of Chinese modern theatre historically, but also helps us to find out the classic works and enrich the theory of theatres. More importantly, this morphology originates from the summary of Chinese modern theatre and adheres to the principles of coexistence and freedom of art, that is, no matter what form it might take, works by dramatists, by directors, by actors, by the audience – or even self-directed speeches or self-examination works – deserve an equal and fair show on the theatre stage.

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