

Chen Shouzhu's Drama Research Method of Comparative Study between Chinese and Western Drama Take Cao Yu's plays as an example

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Abstract: Mr.Chen Shouzhu is a renowned drama theorist in China. He began his career in drama at a young age and, while teaching at a drama school, translated Western drama literature and applied the comparative drama research methods between China and the West to Chinese drama and Chinese opera, forming his unique perspective. He advocates that drama originates from real life and emphasizes the importance of the creative subject. In his analysis of Cao Yu's plays, he thoroughly examined the influences of Scrib, Ibsen, Chekhov, and others on Cao Yu's works, and also elaborated on the national style in Cao Yu's plays with solid evidence, providing guidance for future researchers.

Keywords: Chen Shouzhu; drama; reality; national style

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Mr.Chen Shouzhu is a renowned drama theorist in China. He enjoyed watching plays in his youth and later developed an inseparable bond with drama. He wrote novels such as "Hongyi," "Hongdou," and "Naihe Tian." In 1940, after moving from Chongqing to Jiang 'an to teach at the Drama Academy, he translated a large number of Western literary materials. "But the Drama Academy, a hub of drama experts, had a considerable number of professional books in Chinese and Western languages, regular performances, an artistic atmosphere, and his wife Shen Weide, who had entered the world of drama before him. All these factors contributed to the diligent and studious Chen Shouzhu's transition from novel writing to drama theory research." (Huang, 1999) He was combining Western drama theory with Chinese drama and opera, conducting profound analysis and reflection, laying the foundation for the development of Chinese drama theory.

He posited that "drama is the artistic reflection of life, emphasizing its vitality derived from reality. Throughout his career, he consistently advocated using dramatic characteristics to mirror life, asserting that both tragedy and comedy serve as reflections and aesthetic evaluations of existence. Simultaneously, he began recognizing the creative subject's role." (Zhu, 1991) In analyzing Cao Yu's plays, he conducted comparative studies between Chinese and Western approaches, examining how Scribe's ingenious play structures influenced Cao Yu's dramatic frameworks, how Ibsen's plot designs shaped Cao Yu's works, and how Chekhov's realist principles impacted Cao Yu's creations.

1.A Comparative Study of Chinese and Western Drama by Chen Shouzhu

In the "Postscript to the Collection of Dramatic Theories," Mr.Chen Shouzhu once mentioned, "In the early 1940s, when I translated *Theories of Drama*, I thought about connecting it with Chinese theater. It wasn't until the early 1950s that this idea suddenly resurfaced in my mind: Could we use Marxist perspectives and methods to synthesize foreign drama, Chinese opera, and spoken drama, thereby establishing a new theoretical system?"

(Chen,1988:559)It was precisely this nascent idea that shaped his unique dramatic perspective. He pointed out that one should examine the evolution of Cao Yu's creative thoughts and artistic forms by linking them to the development of modern European drama. From Cao Yu's plays such as "Thunderstorm," "Sunrise," "Wilderness," "Beijingers," and "Metamorphosis," Mr.Chen Shouzhu conducted comparative analyses between Chinese and Western works, offering profound insights.

In terms of Chinese and Western theatrical techniques, Mr.Chen Shouzhu believed that Cao Yu's plays showed a tendency to learn from European drama. Under Mr.Chen Shouzhu's pen, Cao Yu's play "Thunderstorm" combined

the social background of China at that time with the theatrical technique of "cleverly pieced together plays" by Scribe. He first analyzed that Scribe lived during the turbulent period in France and was a bourgeois playwright, and then analyzed his theatrical technique, namely the "cleverly pieced together plays," which featured ingenious plots, strong theatrical effects, and great appeal to the audience.

Scrub's plays feature bizarre and intense plots with intricate, shifting structures. Though lacking profound ideological depth, they cater to the tastes of the common people. His scriptwriting techniques influenced playwrights like Ibsen, Shaw, and Pirandello. "When Cao Yu wrote *Thunderstorm*, he drew inspiration from Ibsen's plays, particularly the 'Qiaozou' (a form of Chinese drama) style." (Chen, 1988:452) Traces of this style are evident in *Thunderstorm*: the characters' relationships are complex and intertwined, such as the love story between Zhou Puyuan and Lu Shiping, thwarted by feudal society, and the incestuous relationship between Sifeng and Zhou Ping. While the characters' connections are intricate yet interconnected, the root of the tragedy lies in Zhou Puyuan, the feudal patriarch.

The play conceals a secret: the child Lu Shiping took away back then did not die young but survived, though Zhou Puyuan was unaware of this. This also led Zhou Ping to be unaware that she had fallen in love with her own sister. By creating suspense step by step, the story is pushed to its climax, leading the audience to uncover the mystery and strike a chord with their hearts, delivering a profound emotional impact. The play "Thunderstorm" precisely relies on these intricate plots and complex character relationships to align with the traditional Chinese opera's narrative of life's joys and sorrows. The story's bizarre twists perfectly match people's viewing habits, especially as Cao Yu incorporated the dramatic technique of "clever plot construction" into the play, offering the audience a fresh perspective and a refreshing experience.

"It's only natural for audiences to draw parallels between *Thunderstorm* and foreign theatrical works. After all, modern Chinese drama—whether in creative practice or theatrical art—originally evolved from Europe. We must first learn from foreign traditions before establishing our own national theater." (Chen, 1988:393) As academic research on *Thunderstorm* deepens, it becomes clear that the play reflects Zhou Puyuan's dual identity: a German-educated scholar who absorbed Western culture, yet a feudal patriarch from the old society. This feudal mindset led him to neglect his wife Lu Shiping, leaving his own children adrift abroad. His son and daughter's incestuous relationship stemmed from this very mentality. When he subjected Fanyi, who embraced Western ideas, to psychological control, his medication wasn't about preventing illness but about restricting her freedom and stifling her progressive thinking. Through this tightly woven narrative, Cao Yu vividly portrays the tragedies born of feudalism, delivering a powerful critique of oppressive society that resonates deeply with modern audiences.

Different playwrights employ distinct techniques, each yielding unique effects. Ibsen's plays *The Ghosts* and *A Doll's House*, though employing the technique of contrived plots, avoid deliberately crafting bizarre scenarios. Their content remains engaging and resonates with audiences. All things reach their limits, and theatrical works are no exception. When a plot becomes overly coincidental or exaggerated, viewers may eventually grow fatigued, losing interest or even developing a sense of weariness.

Mr. Chen Shouzhu pointed out that Cao Yu did not completely imitate the structure of the Qiaocou opera, but made creative additions on this basis. He did not merely fabricate exaggerated plots, but integrated the real social phenomena of old China at that time. It was precisely due to the control of this feudal patriarch that the tragedy was ultimately brewed. "*Thunderstorm* is an excellent family tragedy with profound social significance." (Chen, 1988:424) This not only endowed his plays with profound appeal and strong emotional impact, but also provoked public reflection. He presented the dark reality of the old society before the public, evoking resonance among the audience, which also reflects the realistic creative tendency of his plays.

2. Chen Shouzhu's Analysis of the Relationship between Society and Drama

Mr. Chen Shouzhu emphasized the vitality of drama derived from reality in his discussion of the relationship

between society and drama. “Cao Yu precisely aimed to expose the evils of feudal families and the dark society that curses the underprivileged to the privileged, which is why he borrowed foreign theatrical techniques to write *Thunderstorm* and *Sunrise*. Introducing foreign theatrical techniques was merely a means, while the purpose was to portray the suffering of old China and seek happiness in a new society.” (Chen,1988:453) The pursuit of a new life is precisely what Chekhov's dramatic creations reflect, and Cao Yu was also influenced by Chekhov. When writing *Sunrise*, he took Chekhov as his mentor, using fragments of life to elucidate a concept.

In terms of dramatic structure, the evolution from Scrib's *La Piecebien faite* to Chekhov's new form epitomizes the trajectory of modern European theater. As scholar Chen Shouzhu observed, “Scrib's formalist approach that defied reality sparked discontent in the theater world by the late 19th century. Realism demanded playwrights to break free from conventional scripts, exploring innovative techniques and forms to create authentic stage images and reveal the essence of social life.” (Chen,1988:398)Cao Yu, keeping pace with European developments, adopted Chekhov's method of using fragmented life experiences to convey ideas—a perspective Chen Shouzhu endorsed. He stressed that theater must draw from the vitality of real life, as only works that resonate with authentic living can leave a lasting impression on audiences, bridge the gap, and evoke profound responses.

When discussing Chekhov's influence on Cao Yu, it is essential to mention Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen. Cao Yu's dramatic style was profoundly shaped by Ibsen, as he had been a devoted admirer of the Norwegian master during his high school years. Ibsen, a leading figure in modern European theater, meticulously studied *La Piecebien faite* technique while serving as a playwright and director at the Royal Theatre of Bergen for five years. His early work *The Banquet at Sulhaug* (1856) achieved remarkable success during its initial performances, with its ingenious plot derived from Scribe's 1841 comedy "A Chain." His mid-career plays, including "A Doll's House" and "The Ghosts," also employed the juggling structure, where the revelation of secrets altered the characters' fates. These works exposed the dark corruption of the bourgeoisie, advocated for women's liberation, and used *La Piecebien faite* technique to highlight characters' personalities, leaving a lasting impression on audiences. When Chekhov was still young, Ibsen had already established himself firmly in the European theater scene.

Chekhov opposed this kind of "drama" that severely detached from real life. He repeatedly emphasized that writers should depict the most authentic aspects of life, avoiding excessive theatricality. In 1936, Cao Yu openly admitted: "I remember being captivated by the profound and intricate artistry of Chekhov several years ago." After completing *Thunderstorm*, he grew weary of the excessive technicality. Chekhov's *Three Sisters* employed fragmented techniques in *Sunrise*, using life's fragmented fragments to illustrate a concept. In *Sunrise*, the tragic love story of Chen Bailu unfolds from a movie star to a socialite. Once a star of the stage, she was repeatedly exploited until her radiant eyes faded, becoming a victim of the old society. Sacrificing her ideals, she was defeated by the dark old society, reduced to a lonely dreamer. This so-called fantasy, not idealism, stemmed from the impossibility of her desired love. She was merely a pawn in the game. Once her illusions shattered, the light in her eyes became as precious as her life itself. Losing that light meant losing life. This was the reality of the old society, the fragmented fragments of human existence. Playwriting must reflect real life—this was Chekhov's unwavering principle.

In portraying the authenticity of life, Chekhov appears to embody Zola's naturalist philosophy. He insisted that drama should never detach from real life, but rather reveal the trends of social development through the mundane aspects of daily existence. His profound sympathy for the lower classes, intense hatred for dark forces, and yearning for a better life marked a breakthrough from traditional theatrical concepts. This is evident in *Sunrise*, where Chen Bailu, despite his deep hatred for oppressive forces and longing for a better life, ultimately succumbs to reality.

Secondly, in Chekhov's plays, characters' actions are not outwardly visible but rather concealed within, revealing their inner conflicts and personalities. This is exemplified in his novel *The Sorrows*, which depicts a carriage driver who has lost his son. Unable to voice his inner anguish, he confides in his horse, thereby exposing his inner turmoil through such mundane daily affairs—touching the heart as if the events were real. Though the plot is

simple, the work is rich in meaning and emotion. Such fragmented glimpses of life capture the authenticity that plays should embody. In *Vanka*, the story follows nine-year-old apprentice Vanka, who suffers abuse from his shoemaker master and mistress but has no one to turn to. He tries to write to his grandfather living in the countryside, but the letters he sends are addressed to no one, leaving his emotions unexpressed and forcing him to bear them alone.

In the end, he could only express his inner anguish and troubles through letters, pouring out his feelings to another version of himself while simultaneously imagining conversations with his grandfather. Though Chekhov did not directly depict their tragic circumstances, he conveyed a sense of oppression to the audience through the protagonist's inner actions. “ Chekhov's ability to reveal characters' latent melancholy, sorrow, longing, and joy in the mundane details of everyday life is indeed a remarkable originality. ” (Chen,1988:408) These techniques highlight the art of portraying characters' inner worlds.

In Chekhov's plays, dialogue often carries more weight than actions, and silence can sometimes be more significant than speech—a defining feature of his dramatic language. (Chen,1988:417) His groundbreaking approach to theatrical expression lies in using concise phrases, disconnected dialogues, and moments of silence to propel the protagonist's inner journey. This character-driven, succinct, and lifelike language is exemplified in the fourth act of *The Cherry Orchard*, where brief lines, interjections, and pauses of silence spark misunderstandings and missed opportunities, gradually revealing the characters' psychological evolution. Similarly, in Cao Yu's *Sunrise*, the opening dialogue between Wang Fusheng and Chen Bailu in Act IV poignantly captures the characters' inner turmoil.

At the opening of Act IV, Miss Chen Bailu, a cosmopolitan socialite, stands alone by the window. Though her life is a glittering illusion of luxury, her heart yearns for freedom and happiness. She detests the criminal underworld yet feels powerless to resist. Her inner turmoil is conveyed through silent expressions and simple lines. In the play, Chen Bailu exclaims, "I've had enough! I want to go home." Wang Fusheng responds, "Miss, do you have a home?" These brief lines not only reveal Chen Bailu's homelessness but also her profound longing for a warm sanctuary. Yet she has no one to confide in, and Wang Fusheng fails to understand her. At this moment, Chen Bailu resembles the horseman in Chekhov's *The Sorrows*—her anguish and unspoken despair can only be suppressed. The play skillfully portrays Chen Bailu's inner turmoil, frustration, and yearning—a common plight of ordinary people in the old society who felt powerless to resist. This is precisely the vitality of drama rooted in reality, as depicted by Mr.Chen Shouzhu.

Mr.Chen Shouzhu, through the comparison of the plays of Chekhov and Cao Yu, thinks that drama is the vitality of reality, and emphasizes the importance of the creative subject. Only by understanding the background of the author can we understand the play, understand what happened in that era, and understand the cultural connotation of a nation.

3.The Idea of Nationalization of Drama by Chen Shouzhu

Chinese culture spans five thousand years, and China possesses its own unique cultural charm. While preserving the essence of its own culture, it should also absorb and learn from foreign cultures. In portraying the authentic "fragmented aspects of life" of its people, attention should also be paid to the consciousness of the creative subject, the environment in which they live, as well as their ideological tendencies and connotations. Only in this way can one deeply understand the stories behind the plays. In the comparative study of Chinese and Western drama, attention should be paid to the academic frontiers of the West, taking the essence and discarding the dross, making rational sacrifices to ensure the long-term development of one's own drama and making more plays timeless. For a nation to stand tall among the world's nations, mere borrowing and learning are far from enough. Only by possessing its own unique national culture can a country remain unshaken, always standing at the forefront of the world, with a high degree of cultural confidence to stand more firmly.

In the realm of drama—a form of art rooted in the masses—national characteristics and cultural confidence are paramount. This enables Chinese theater to transcend borders, embodying the essence of our nation. “The global

acclaim of Cao Yu's plays stems from their portrayal of national life and the expression of national character, thereby endowing them with distinct national traits." (Chen,1988:459) This enduring legacy allows his works to be studied and passed down through generations, inviting future generations to explore their profound meanings. His plays consistently depict the feudal old society, exposing its darkness and the people's helplessness. He vividly portrays the spiritual devastation inflicted by the old society and the oppression among individuals, delivering a scathing critique and satire of the "man-eating-man" phenomenon in that era.

From "Thunderstorm" to "Metamorphosis" marked Cao Yu's progressive steps. When the nation was in peril, he portrayed the corruption and bureaucratic atmosphere of the Kuomintang in China during the Anti-Japanese War through his dramatic works, delivering fierce criticism against them. For instance, the hospital director profited from the national crisis, acted arrogantly and tyrannically, engaged in favoritism and malpractice, and acted hypocritically, leading to the lack of management and inefficiency in the hospital where he worked. This was the national malady of the old China. Unless such maladies are eradicated, the progress of the Anti-Japanese War will be hindered. Only by eliminating these maladies can the old China achieve victory, and the new China be born. Thus, Cao Yu created "Metamorphosis" through such authentic depictions of life, employing dramatic techniques to produce a work unique to his nation, one imbued with national character.

In "Metamorphosis", the patriotic hero Doctor Ding continuously saves lives and helps the wounded, earnestly rescuing this old China. He can be called the backbone of the nation, representing the indomitable national character and spirit of the Chinese people. It is precisely these works that reflect national life and express national personality, with distinct national characteristics and beloved by the people of their own country, that can earn admiration from abroad.

From Mr.Chen Shouzhu's perspective, artistic works should not only reflect life but also focus on the creator's consciousness, with playwrights' awareness being particularly crucial. Artistic creations can inspire, guide, and uplift people, while exceptional works provide profound spiritual solace. Although European theatrical movements flourished from the early 20th century through the 1940s, Cao Yu remained undistracted. He insisted on rooted in his national identity while incorporating European theatrical techniques, crafting works imbued with national character. His creations continue to inspire people in the old society to relentlessly pursue light, freedom, and resistance against evil forces. They remind people that only through unity can dawn break and a brighter future be achieved.

4.Epilogue

Mr.Shouzhu dedicated himself to integrating Eastern and Western theatrical theories, examining and selecting his research foothold amidst the intricate interplay of Western "other" culture and China's "self" national culture.

(Wu,2021)First, he conducted comparative studies of Chinese and Western plays, analyzing European theatrical techniques in the context of the playwrights' historical backgrounds, followed by an examination of Chinese playwrights and their works. Second, he believed that theater should reflect real life rather than embellish it. Finally, he emphasized the importance of the creative subject, the focus on national culture, the formation of a national style, and the full display of national characteristics to produce excellent theatrical works. By drawing on the strengths of Western plays and integrating China's national style, he aimed to create artistic works beloved by the masses. Cao Yu was such a playwright, adhering to the principles of realism, authentically depicting the social phenomena and darkness of old China. He absorbed the theatrical techniques of Scribb, Ibsen, and Chekhov, from the structure of theatrical creation to the simplification and naturalization of dialogue, forming his own creative style and leaving a profound impression. Amidst the rise and fall of various Western schools, Mr.Chen Shouzhu used comparative research methods to remind later generations that they should not blindly imitate but instead seek plays that are beloved by the Chinese people. Even when faced with skepticism, he remained steadfast in his academic research, offering inspiration to future generations.

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