

Peking Opera: Simplicity out of Necessity

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In comparison with the modern Western realistic theatre, the highly stylized acting and the representationally bare stage of the Peking Opera are often considered to be symbolic or abstract. But it does not seem quite true; there are strong realistic elements. The most systematic analysis of the conventions of this stage I have come across is Wei Tzu-yün's short paper entitled "The Treatment of Time and Space on Peking Opera Stage." In this paper Wei categorizes the conventions of Peking Opera into realistic expression, borrowed expression, and imaginative expression. He says that the costumes, weapons, candles, tables and chairs (when they are used as tables and chairs) of this theatre, for example, are "all articles actually used in our daily life" though historical accuracy is usually not observed. The Peking Opera "does not reject realism; rather, in order to break through the limits of theatrical time and space, realistic articles and actions are manipulated by the artistic convention so as to break through historical time and space." Therefore, when a table or chair is used to represent a mountain, a platform, a house, or other high things, or other articles used in a like manner, they follow the convention of borrowed expression, thus to meet the need of fast changes of time and space required by the plot development. By convention of imaginative expression Wei means the mimetic gestures and *shen-tuan* (身段 body expressions), such as the opening and closing of a door, the taming and saddling of a horse, travelling by boat, etc., which are designed to reveal or suggest things physically absent from the stage.¹

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Generally speaking, I agree with what Wei has said, but I doubt very much that the borrowed and imaginative expressions were the results of an artistic breaking through. In my opinion, such conventions were formed or formulated in the early stage not as a result of artistic achievement but out of necessity because of physical and artistic difficulties. In other words, they came from the necessity of using handy makeshifts and pretending, like what happens in children's play. Such conventions seem universally common in all early theatres which were financially and artistically poor. But why has the Western theatre undergone so many changes while the classical Chinese stage has remained simple, or has refused to change? Very little seems to have been said about this, and the present study ventures to look for some answers for this phenomenon from factors both within and without the theatre, with reference to Western theatre—not as a comparative study of the theatres East and West, but as borrowed information or evidences for the support of my argument. Though the study will consider the traditional Chinese theatre as a whole, the Peking Opera is used representatively in terms of staging form and method as it is the last and best living theatre of this tradition.

Internal Conditioning Factors

When we talk about the development of theatre arts, we may immediately think of such elements as scripts, acting styles, stage form, training and repertory systems, dramatic theories and theatrical movements. All these are of course closely related. For convenience's sake, we will start with the script.

The Script Readers familiar with the Chinese literary history know that the classical Chinese plays borrowed greatly from the Speech-and-song literature (講唱文學 similar in form to the French *chante-fable*) and there has been little change in form and style. For a quick reference, some lines from this literary form and plays are quoted as follows:

- A. from *Master Tung's Western Chamber Romance* (童解元西廂)—a Speech-and-song literature:

[The story narrator sings of Student Chang's action]

Leaving for the capital, the candidate
Said farewell by a country road.
'At the height of
Our happiness,
I must leave Ying-ying to make my name in the world . . . ²

B. From *A Dream of Butterflies* (蝴蝶夢)—a Yüan play:

Pao (falls asleep at the desk; then rises and enacts his dream)
Burdened with affairs as I am, how could I go to sleep? I shall take
a stroll. At the back of this hall I find a side-door. I will open it
and look out. Ah, it is a lovely garden! . . . ³

C. from *The Lute* (琵琶記)—a Ming play:

Chao (enters and sings)
Back again to the bare tomb
For the ceremony of leave-taking!
Troubled by the future, anguished in the present,
Their portraits I will now paint, to show all whom I meet;
Dumbly eloquent in their sorrow, they will plead for me . . . ⁴

D. from *The Blood-stained Fan* (桃花扇)—a Ch'ing play:

Story-teller Liu (enters, disguised as a fisherman and shouldering a bundle;
sings)
Leaving the lonely woods with their plaintively rustling leaves,
I am greeted by clusters of flowering rush and smartweed,—
With my cormorant plume hat worn all askew
And my white beard fluttering in the wind,
Who would know me for a madcap latter-day court jester?
I, Liu Ching-t'ing, braving the wind and rain, walked all the way up
the river, but never saw any mutinous troops plundering the grain.
Perhaps it was only a rumour. I must now sit on the grass, open my
bundle, change into hat and boots, so as to deliver the letter . . . ⁵

E. from *The Faithful Harlot* (玉堂春)—a Peking opera:

Su San: Ai-Ya! I, Su San,
Out of Hung Tung county,
Come into the street,
My heart is fettered! . . . ⁶

Such self-descriptions of action, locale, and/or scenery exist in all classical Chinese plays, and are still loved by most playwrights of the Peking Opera today. They are different from the monologue and soliloquy in Western drama because such lines in Chinese plays are often in the tone of a storyteller instead of that of natural speech from the mouth of a dramatic character. No matter if they can be treated as a kind of characters' thinking-aloud, it is obvious that such self-descriptions of action, scenery, and locale would not encourage the use of realistic sets on the stage. Moreover, the classical plays have been written mostly in verse. Since verse or poetry is not natural in our everyday speech, a representational setting that aims to produce illusion could not go easily with such a language style. In other words, the language form could make scenic design artistically more difficult, and the continuous emphasis and interest in the poetic language for drama in the tradition of the Speech-and-song literature could therefore be a conditioning factor for keeping the classical Chinese stage simple and bare and also making it enjoyable only to a very small group of audience today. But why would the Chinese playwrights of classical drama not turn to prose as, for instance, the romantic writers like Hugo did in the West when they found poetry no longer appealing to the mass audience ?

In addition to the poetic language, the story development of a play also follows the manner of the Speech-and-song narration—changing the locales freely at the storyteller's will. This would add to the practical difficulties if the scenery were to be materialized on stage. In fact, the playwrights seem to care very little about it. For instance, only in a very few plays can we find some stage directions about settings; when there are, they are always for individual scenes. Take Li Yü's *Mansion in the Mirage* (蜃中樓), which, to my knowledge, contains the longest and most detailed stage directions on scenery. There are descriptions not only of the mansion but also of how it is to appear and how a stick is to be transformed into a bridge between the mansion and the seashore. In another scene of the play, a two-story pavilion is required, with the upper story for gods and the lower for human characters. But when the locales change to the underwater palaces of the sea-gods or their temples on land, there is again the bare stage with no indication of any kind of settings at all. Such occasional uses of scenery are to me of the nature of stage properties, similar to the use of a painted cloth for a city wall in Peking Opera, only more elaborated.

Scenery in the traditional Chinese theatre seemed commonly ignored

or neglected for long, not only by playwrights, but also by other people of this theatre. For instance, in books and essays on this theatre, both in English and Chinese, I have never found any names to be recorded as scenic designers. Even years after the drama reform in Mainland China since the 1940's, no Peking Opera or other traditional repertoires had included in their systems any artists for design and no program or course on design had ever been offered in its training centers or schools. In recent years, though scenery for traditional plays is sometimes tried, but is still considered a kind of luxury, both in Taiwan and Mainland China.⁷ Traditional theatre theorists and critics seemed to have paid no attention to it either.

Dramatic Theories and Criticism In the history of Western theatre, dramatic theory and practice have mutually influenced each other and worked together to enable all the changes and progress. For example, neoclassicism's emphasis on the three unities could be considered the first step in making it easier for the development of representational scenery; the romantic dramatists' insistence on historically accurate settings and costumes could be the second step; and naturalism and realism's principle of scientific objectivity completed the concept of the theatre of illusion. But it has been very different in China. If we take a look at the one hundred-and-ten-odd essays on classical theatre in the three biggest anthologies—*Chung-kuo ku-tien hsi-ch'ü lun-chu ch'eng* (中國古典戲曲論著集成), *Hsin-ch'ü-yüan* (新曲苑), and the drama section of *Chung-kuo ku-tien wen-hsüeh lun-wen ching-hsüan ts'ung-k'an* (中國古典文學論文精選叢刊 [戲劇類]), we will find that most of them are about metrics, and fragmentary information and/or brief comments about plays, players, playwrights, music, and musicians. Some of them contain nothing more than lists of plays and plot summaries. Only a few are on the nature of traditional theatre; one is on acting (written in 1828 and first published in 1917). I have found not a single one, in these anthologies or elsewhere, that says anything about scenery. Even Li Yü's *Casual Notes on Leisure Life* (閒情偶寄), which contains not only detailed and systematic discussions on classical Chinese drama and theatre (such as plot, character, language, music, comic devices, and actor training), but also artistic and practical information and opinions about house and garden planning and design, touches nothing about the scenic aspect. In short, unlike what has happened to the Western arts and theatre, the lack of theoretical and critical stimulations for change must be one of the reasons for the classical Chinese theatre to remain basically the same up to this day.

It may also be pointed out that none of these theoretists and critics said anything about play directing, not even Li Yü, who trained his own repertory to stage his own plays. Though we can understand that in the early times, like it was in the West, the playwright, the owner of a troupe, or an experienced actor did the work of directing. But the fact that the traditional theatre in China did not see the function and importance of a director or find any great figures like Georg II, Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, Gordon Craig, and Konstantin Stanislavsky in modern Western theatre, could also be a significant element for its being stationary for so long. Though a director is now there in the rehearsing of a New Peking Opera play in Mainland China, I do not know how much authority he may really have. In Taiwan, a Peking Opera director usually sees but to the style and/or patterns of body expressions and movements, and only sometimes a little attention may be paid to music and costume. His work is not much more than that of a choreographer. In my collaboration in directing *Chairs* (席, a free adaptation of Ionesco's *The Chairs*, the first and only try of the kind up to this moment) for a Peking Opera troupe, I found it almost impossible to convince them to accept any suggestions about the set, props, costume, blocking, lighting, music, and sound effect.⁸ They had little conception of directing in the modern sense of the word.

The Acting and the Stage Like its poetic language, the highly stylized acting of this classical theatre could not be easily adjusted to suit representational settings. For instance, if a door is physically built on the stage, the beautiful gestures of opening and closing the door and movement of crossing the threshold have to be mostly sacrificed. That would mean a great loss. What is more, in many a play, the imaginary door is located at stage down-center. In such a case, the problem would be more than the sacrifice of the beauty of the body expressions; there is the difficulties of letting the audience see the actors.

The traditional stage structure added difficulties to scenery design. The old stage, either temporarily erected ones for festivals and other occasional purposes or permanent ones in temples, were open on three sides, very much like the folk theatre of medieval Europe or the thrust stage today. The acting was meant for the audience on all open sides. Most of the stages for traditional plays, in the country and cities, are still of this form. The new adaptation of proscenium structure should have made the work of scenic design easier. But the adaptation is usually limited to the acting area; there

is no room in the back or on the sides of it and no flying equipment or space above for the shifting of sets.⁹ For such stage structures, it was only natural to have developed such an acting style in the early days and to have continued to grow in the one and same direction. There has been no theoretical or practical stimulations strong enough to affect any wide and significant change. As a rule, the longer a convention exists, the stronger it grows, and, no matter it is good or bad, the more difficult it becomes to make any change or modification of it. So when this acting style had been there so long that it became a "standard," it began to act as an inertia, a negative force for innovation, not only to the actors but also to the audience. It may not be surprising to know that even today many old lovers of this theatre still insist that scenery in any form is superfluous, and some even say that the Peking Opera is already a perfection and must remain exactly as it is for good. Their opinion has undoubtedly created a kind of barrier too in the development of classical theatre in China.

External Influences

It is generally agreed that the economy of China has been based on agriculture and, therefore, there has been little change in the life patterns and attitudes of her people before the turn of the 20th century. Many theatrical performances were, and still are in many places, only a part of the celebrations of happy occasions of an individual, a family, or a community—birthdays, promotions, marriages, and the setting up of new rules, or of rituals like the burial of the dead and praying for rain—mostly arranged or controlled by the landlords. The subject matter of the plays is usually drawn from historical and legendary stories that may serve the purpose of teaching traditional morals like loyalty and filial duty.¹⁰

There was also the theatre for entertainment known as *kau-lan* (勾欄), which was already popular in many big cities during the Sung dynasty (960–1127). Its programs ran from early morning till night. But this theatre did not provide any favorable conditions for the development of scenery either, because (1) the programs were composed of storytelling, dance, drama, and all types of variety shows—the stage was not built for inclusive use of the theatre *per se*, and (2) the repertoires were all traveling troupes, which had to "rush from city to city and hit chances from town to town." It

was rather rare for them to stay at one place for long.¹¹ Under such circumstances, it would be very impractical and difficult for a company to build any scenery or sets and carry them on the road. Transportation would not have been convenient in the older times either.

The commercial theatre of the late Ch'ing dynasty (around 1750—1850) was less significant in the growth of stage form as it was not popular and usually lasted only a week or two each season.¹² The few three-story stages in the palaces were too exceptional to have any influence in the overall development.¹³ During the last period of the Ch'ing dynasty, though the court support and the aristocratic and the Yang-chow salt merchant families' interest in the theatre contributed greatly to the rise of the Peking Opera,¹⁴ it did not cause any innovation. The classical Chinese theatre remained a theatre of actors, and it still is (that is perhaps one of the main reasons why they spent so much time, money, and effort on the elaboration of the costume). And it is still very common for fans of this theatre to go to a performance or the same play once and again simply because of the attraction of a certain famous actor or actress. So, before the introduction of modern theatre in Shanghai, which will be mentioned a little later, there was no commercial interest and competition in the Chinese theatre like those in the West, which played important roles in the growth of art and theatre after the decline of patronage.

From the brief analysis above, it should be logical to conclude that (1) physical and artistic difficulties must have conditioned the growth, and (2) the want of theoretical and critical stimulation and guidance and the lack of strong commercial competition and interest could mean the absence of some significant creative forces to the progress of classical theatre in China, especially in terms of spectacle.

Some Further Considerations

In the West dramatic theories and movements, the participation of businessmen, the invention of modern technology, etc. have all contributed, in one way or another, to the development of the dramatic art. But in China, because of the total or partial absence of the internal and external factors mentioned above, and because of the mutual influence and inter-dependence among the language, the structure of plot development, the special acting

style, and the realistically bare stage—because of all these the classical theatre has remained static or relatively unchanged. But one may still wonder if its stability has been completely owing to physical and artistic difficulties, or if it is literally impossible to make any changes in it.

Certainly the questions cannot be answered by a simple yes or no, and purely theoretical assumptions may take us nowhere either. Some facts may lead us to a better understanding.

The Puppet Shows Any good history of the Chinese theatre may tell us that the puppet shows had already had rather complicated mechanical and chemical devices and were more popular than the human actors' theatre during the Sung period. It is a pity that we do not know enough (actually we know almost nothing) of the human stage of the Sung dynasty to make some meaningful comparison between them and, what is more, we do not know how the puppet theatre developed and how or why it withered after the Sung. But we know clearly that in the past few decades in Taiwan, the traditional puppet theatre has made much greater effort in the adaptation of scenery and lighting, pretty successfully on stage and television, than the local theatre with human actors. The reasons may be as follows: (1) It is more convenient to travel with the puppets than with actors and properties; (2) it is less difficult to design for the puppet stage because it is much smaller in size and the financial, technical, and artistic problems can be solved more easily. If these reasons are justifiable, we can believe that we could also make scenery, lighting, and other modern stage devices work on the classical Chinese stage as long as there are sufficient investment of money and devotion of talents to do it. The following two facts may help speak for this supposition.

The Modern Theatre in Shanghai The first modern commercial theatre in China emerged in Shanghai in 1853. By the 1860's a few more were seen there and in other metropolitan centers. But the use of scenery, lighting, and other modern theatrical devices for the traditional stage did not appear till the 1900's. According to what I have read and heard, this modern theatre was fairly well received.¹⁵ This shows that commercial interest could bring change and/or prosperity to the Chinese theatre and that some modern Western conceptions and techniques could work with this theatre, too. But one may ask at this point why such modernized commercial theatres did not flourish in China. The most direct answer to me is the long destructive wars of the time, with their twofold influence. On the one hand, there

was the direct damage; on the other, the highly nationalistic spirit stimulated by them, especially the war against the Japanese invasion, found the subject matter and form of the Peking Opera too remote from immediate need. **Recent Experiments in Peking Opera** In the past few decades in Taiwan, scenery and lighting have been tried for Peking Opera, occasionally on stage—mostly non-commercial in nature—and more often on television. Though they were mostly complete failures and only a few were partially successful, the experiments suggest that it is possible for Peking Opera to assimilate new techniques. Besides, the failures of these experiments resulted from the lack of sufficient theatre knowledge or the lack of cooperation or coordination among the playwrights, actors, musicians, and the designers. The situation in Mainland China seems a little more complicated, but not much different in nature.

To sum up, the simplicity and stability of Peking Opera and the classical Chinese theatres as a whole were, in the early stages at least, due to physical and artistic difficulties, of which the latter might be harder to overcome. But I feel that at the very bottom of all the problems and possibilities mentioned above, there is the traditional Chinese attitude toward life—to meet millions of changes with non-change; to see things from a point somewhere in between the realistic and the idealistic and to avoid the extremes. Whether or not this comes from Confucius's teaching of the "golden mean" and/or is the characteristic of an agricultural society, I am not sure. But the growth of the classical theatre in China must have been conditioned by this attitude. In theory and practice, in art and actual life, the Chinese prefer simplicity to complexity, unity to variety, and stability to change. What Chiang Yee says of fireworks and gunpowder seems to me a very concrete illustration of this attitude. He writes:

I remember our fireworks in the air and wonder why we Chinese did not follow up our invention of gunpowder by inventing bombing aeroplanes. Perhaps it was because, though we first discovered how to make gunpowder, it did not occur to us to do anything but play with it.¹⁶

Though the Chinese were not the first to invent theatre, the Chinese attitude toward it, especially the Chinese of the older generations, seems one of just playing with it, and in playing with it the simple stage and verse lines may allow more room for imagination to work.

Certainly the stage and staging form of the classical Chinese theatre has had its positive values, too. Its implicit or economy has helped popularize this theatre in China; its bare stage has forced the actors, and the audience too, to concentrate on the art of acting, and its artistic quality has inspired the work of some great Western dramatists like Grotowski and Brecht, and also the experimental theatre in Taiwan today.¹⁷ But the old and new Chinese lovers of this theatre must realize now that the general attitude toward life in China has long begun to change. If this classical theatre is to continue to function, it needs to assimilate new ideas and techniques, especially in the choice of subject matter and the art of playwriting.

Notes

1. Wei Tzu-yün, "Treatment of Space and Time on Peking Opera Stage," MS. The paper was read at the 1982 Asian Theatre Conference in Taipei.
2. Li-li Ch'en, tr., *Master Tung's Western Chamber Romance (Tung Hsi-hsiang chu-kung-tiao): A Chinese Chantefable* (Cambridge, London, New York, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 171.
3. H. C. Chang, tr., *Chinese Literature: Popular Fiction and Drama* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1973), p. 67. There is a brief introduction to each play.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 101.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 319.
6. Josephine Huang Hung, tr., *Classical Chinese Plays* (Taipei: Mei Ya Publications, 1971), pp. 43-44.
7. Information about drama reform in Mainland China before the 1970's is based upon Colin Mackerras's *Amateur Theatre in China: 1949-1966* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1973) and *The Chinese Theatre in Modern Times: From 1840 to the Present Day* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1975); Hua-yuan Li Mowry's *Yang-pan Hsi—New Theatre in China. Studies in Chinese Communist Terminology*, No. 15 (University of California at Berkeley, 1973); Daniel S. P. Yang's "The Traditional Theatre of China in Its Contemporary Setting: An Examination of the Patterns of Change within the Peking Opera since 1949" (Dissertation, 1968); and Chao Tsung's (趙聰), 中國大陸的戲曲改革: 一九四二—一九六七 (Hong Kong: 香港中文大學, 1969). Recent information came from informal discussions with Chinese and Western scholars and students who had studied the traditional theatre there.

Information of the traditional theatre, repertoires, and training centers and schools in Taiwan were obtained from my personal involvement, visits to these

- places, and interviews and talks with people in the field. All later references to the modern conditions of this theatre in Taiwan and Mainland China are based on the information mentioned above unless further sources are indicated.
8. For further information about the production, see my " 席的形成與意義 " 中外文學 XI, 4 (September 1982), 122-27.
 9. For the development of theatrical structures in China, see Chou I-pai (周貽白), 中國劇場史 (Shanghai: 商務印書館, 1936).
 10. Tanaka Ichinari (田仲一成), translated into Chinese by Wu Mi-ch'a (吳密察), " 中國地方劇的發展構造," *Chinese Folklore: Reports and Studies* (民俗曲藝) No. 12, pp. 1-22; No. 13, pp. 44-57; No. 14, pp. 53-67. The article was originally published in 東洋文化 No. 58 (March 1978). Chiou Kun-liang (邱坤良) " 傳統民間劇場功能及其在現代社會的發展方向," 傳統文化與現代生活研討會論文集 (Taipei: 中華文化復興運動推行委員會, 1982), pp. 481-96. Chiou's paper and the schedules of the traditional repertoires in Taiwan published in every issue of the *Chinese Folklore* show that they are still invited to perform irregularly in temples (usually on permanent stages), streets, or open fields (on temporary stages).
 11. Meng Yuan-lao, etc. (孟元老等), 東京夢華錄 (外四種) (Taipei: 大立出版社, 1980), pp. 123-24, 440-42; Ch'ien Nan-yang (錢南揚), 戲文概說 (Taipei: 木鐸出版社, 1982), pp. 245-49; Chou I-pai, 中國戲劇史 (Shanghai: 1953), pp. 294-308; Tseng Yong-yih (曾永義), 說俗文學 (Taipei: 聯經出版社, 1980), pp. 347-48.
 12. Tanaka, *Chinese Folklore*, No. 14, pp. 61-63.
 13. In addition to Chou I-pai's work cited in n. 9, see also Niu Ch'uan-hai (牛川海), 乾隆時期劇場活動之研究 (Taipei: 華岡出版社, 1977).
 14. Colin Mackerras's *The Rise of the Peking Opera: 1770-1870* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972) seems to me the best study on this aspect.
 15. Li Fu-sheng (李浮生), 春申梨園史話 (Taipei: by the author, 1980), pp. 5-85. Chou I-pai, 中國劇場史, pp. 10-11, 24.
 16. Chiang Yee, *A Chinese Childhood* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1963), p. 184.
 17. Wu Jing-jyi (吳靜吉), " 傳統劇場如何啟發現代劇場的靈感," 傳統文化與現代生活研討會論文集, pp. 467-80. The paper reviews how Brecht, Grotowski, Peter Brook and some others assimilated the Peking Opera training method and staging techniques for their own use.