Eugene O'Neill and China

Horst Frenz

I

Two major events in Eugene O'Neill's life reflect the playwright's interest in Asia – his trip to the Orient in 1928 and the building of Tao House in which he and Carlotta lived for more than six years, from the fall of 1937 to February, 1944. After short stops in Singapore, Saigon and Hong Kong, O'Neill and Carlotta left their ship in Shanghai. One of the first persons he met was a young Canadian whom O'Neill knew from their Greenwich Village days. Alfred Batson, who worked as a reporter for the *North China Daily News,* had to promise not to mention O'Neill's arrival in Shanghai, and only days later (November 22, 1928) published this report: "Arriving in Shanghai with his characteristic aversion from publicity, Eugene O'Neill . . . has been recuperating in a local hotel from a severe indisposition contracted recently at Singapore by underestimating the force of the sun's rays while bathing. . . ." After discussing *Strange Interlude* as a "daring innovation" in playwriting, Batson talked about a few earlier plays, briefly sketched O'Neill's career, and concluded: "The world trip was taken to establish new contacts and see more of life under varied conditions. While in Shanghai he is anxious to live quietly and to regain his health. . . ."

In Shanghai, O'Neill felt restless and uneasy; he was troubled by personal problems. Heavy drinking worsened his already weakened condition, and a stay in the hospital became necessary. Apparently "the Orient of reality was not living up to his romantic expectations,"[1] and Mai-mai Sze,[2] who later became a close friend of the O'Neills, is supposed to have

remarked that "Gene and Carlotta traveled to the East like a pair of tourists"[3] and on another occasion that the O'Neills "had a naive romantic idea of China – the wisdom, the pageantry and so forth were superficially conceived and romanticized by them."[4]

Tao House, which Carlotta herself called "a pseudo-Chinese house," was built out of white concrete blocks, with a black tile roof, and doors and shutters painted Chinese orange or red. Dark blue ceilings, "the very delicate and graceful Chinese furniture against these rough stones"[5] and mirrors in various rooms were designed to heighten the Oriental atmosphere inside the house. A winding brick walk had been built behind the house "in observance of the Chinese proverb that evil moves only in a straight line."[6]

It was again Mai-mai Sze who is supposed to have confided to an acquaintance that the name "Tao" for the O'Neill house was not particularly appropriate; apparently she viewed their interest in the Orient with tolerant amusement.[7]

Obviously, these two events would not suffice to convince us that O'Neill showed more than a fascination with Asia. There is, however, a play – and I am thinking of *Marco Millions* – in which he dealt prominently with Eastern thought and made use of his extensive reading in Eastern religions. O'Neill himself admitted, in a letter to Frederic I. Carpenter (dated June 24, 1932), that at one time he felt the need to grasp Oriental thought in order to acquire some philosophical background for his writings, did quite a lot of reading in Oriental philosophy and religion but did not make an intensive study of the field. The letter concludes with the revealing statement: "The mysticism of Lao-tse and Chuang-tzu probably interested me more than any other Oriental writing."[8]

There is an additional piece of evidence which at this point is not fully available to me. According to the Gelbs, O'Neill jotted down nineteen pages of notes for a play on China,[9] apparently dealing with Ch'in Shih Huang (秦始皇), the first sovereign emperor of China, who in a break with the past ordered a number of reforms and carried them out with brute force. He resettled peasants against their wishes, undertook huge building projects, burned books, and in every way acted as a despot. References to the Stoics in Rome and the Confucians in China may offer a clue that O'Neill may have wanted to juxtapose the two groups as he had done with various religious sects in *Marco Millions*. Perhaps he planned to

write a play – and this is pure speculation on my part – which would offer a counterpart to the wise and serene ruler in *Marco Millions* and show the disregard for human lives, the brutality, and the violence of which the first Chinese emperor was capable.

II

Unlike most modern playwrights, O'Neill was not, as he frequently explained, concerned with the relation between man and man. It was the profound relation between man and God that kept haunting him throughout his life. In a letter quoted in the "Intimate Notebooks" of George Jean Nathan, we find him confirming this obsession when he said that "The playwright today must dig at the roots of the sickness of today as he feels it – the death of the old God and the failure of science and materialism to give any satisfying new one for the surviving primitive religious instinct to find a meaning for life in, and to comfort its fears of death with."[10] He continued that "It seems to me that anyone trying to do big work nowadays must have this big subject behind all the little subjects of his plays or novels, or he is simply scribbling around the surface of things and has no more real status than a parlor entertainer."

Now this big subject behind all the little subjects of his plays is no bigger and no smaller than life itself in all its psychological, spiritual, and cosmic significances. While for Aristotle tragedy is the imitation of human action, for O'Neill, living in a society where the old religion began to crumble and new ideologies failed to be spiritually satisfying, the business of writing plays became a way of confronting the ultimate reality of life. With human life in its totality as his province, it is not surprizing that one finds O'Neill's plays constantly reflecting as well as refracting through his particular dramatic prism thoughts and ideas that have touched numerous other writers and thinkers. Indeed, this prism is more like an ever changing kaleidoscope through which one sees a multifaceted and hence illusive O'Neill at work. To pigeonhole him into one neat simple system of thinking is as impossible as it is erroneous.

However, it has been a rather common practice among O'Neill scholars to identify his various ideas and thoughts with those of others. Take *Strange Interlude,* for example. Joseph Wood Krutch maintains that

the play is fundamentally an expression of Freudian theory,[11] whereas Doris Alexander argues that the intellectual design of the play follows Schopenhauer's philosophy.[12] In thus sorting out his strands of thoughts, one often tends to forget one crucial point: Before all else, O'Neill is a man of the theater whose main business is not to expound and carry a certain theory or system of thought neatly to its logical conclusion. His preoccupation is not with the bare essence of life but with the vivid and immediate spectacle of man grappling with life's essential realities. It is in presenting these complex, illusive and essential realities that O'Neill's plays frequently echo certain views which have a long history in philosophy and art.

Indeed, these echoes and chords are inevitable since life is the common subject; but to equate them with a certain system of thoughts or theories is more than a reduction. It is a distortion. O'Neill has aptly referred to himself as a melting pot in which ideas – ancient and modern, East and West – touch and mix until their contradictions are reconciled and become adaptable for his particular purposes. It is only within this context that one can begin to discuss O'Neill and his relationship to such thinkers as Aristotle, Nietzsche, and Lao-tse.

That O'Neill, a man deeply rooted in Western culture, shared intellectual tendencies with many Western thinkers is a matter of course. That he simultaneously reached out for an Eastern tradition would, however, indicate a rather significant departure. In many ways it was a deliberate gesture of his deep frustration with the American society as he saw it. The apparent success of America meant to him failure. In an interview of 1946, the playwright openly revealed his disappointment in a language that would help reinforce many of the plays he wrote: "I'm going on the theory that the United States, instead of being the most successful country in the world, is the greatest failure ... because it was given everything, more than any other country .... Its main idea is that everlasting game of trying to possess your own soul by the possession of something outside of it, too. America is the prime example of this because it happened so quickly and with such immense resources. This was really said in the Bible much better. We are the greatest example of 'For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?'"[13] Later he added that the same philosophy could be found in the precepts of Buddha, Lao-tse, and Mohammed. The disappointment he had with America led

him to the materialistically backward East where the spiritual teachings seemed to offer a hopeful alternative in an increasingly meaningless and darkening society.

If we were to focus our attention on what is specifically Taoist – or for that matter, Eastern – in O'Neill's plays, it might be difficult to prove a comprehensive knowledge in this area. However, it is not our intention to determine how much the American playwright knew about Taoism. Our purpose is to look at his gesture towards an ancient philosophy in China as an indication of his increasing anxiety about the significance of life in the West. That there is in him a genuine interest in the spiritual quietude associated with the Taoist philosophy is rather apparent in various ways. The most overt expression of this is the Tao House he built in 1936 at Danville, near San Francisco.

In the patently autobiographical *Days Without End,* the protagonist, John Loving, is a persona for the playwright. Loving's spiritual wanderings were, as John Henry Raleigh suggests, also the wanderings of O'Neill himself and of many members of his generation. After having been disappointed by a series of sociological schemes, the reader finds John Loving in a new "hiding place" as far away from home as possible. Loving takes refuge first in Oriental mysticism and the Taoist philosophy of Lao-tse, then passes on to Buddha and the ecstasies of solitary contemplation. But as to be expected, the lure of the East does not last and Loving soon turns westward.[14] For him as well as for O'Neill, this eastward turn toward the Tao is a centrifugal move when the center of the Western world was no longer felt to be able to hold together.

In fact, O'Neill's longing for the East dated earlier than 1934 when *Days Without End* was written. As pointed out recently by An Min Hsia (夏安民), O'Neill's references to the East, to China and to Taoist ideas were rather frequent and can be seen in such plays as *Beyond the Horizon* (1918), *The Fountain* (1921-22), *Marco Millions* (1921-25), *Lazarus Laughed* (1925-26), *Strange Interlude* (1925-27), and *Dynamo* (1928).[15]

In *Marco Millions,* for example, the merchantile Marco, sent and sanctioned by the Pope as a wise man to represent the wisdom of the West to the East, is, of course, full of irony. In this play the materialistic Marco is beyond salvation. He is totally untouched by the spiritual beauty of Kukachin, and the Taoist wisdom of Chu-yin never reaches his philistine mind. The Epilogue makes it ruthlessly clear that the spirit of this thirteenth-

century Venetian merchant continues to live in today's Western world where the comfort of material wealth has become the focus of man's existence.

There are many memorable scenes in this play. One which successfully depicts the sound and fury of the West in contrast to the subtle quietude of the Orient occurs when the Imperial Fleet is about to sail for Persia with Marco as an escort to Kukachin. Chu-yin, who sees Marco enter, heralded by a deafening clangor, says to the condescending Marco as if answering an argument in his own mind: "Still, even though they cannot be house-broken, I prefer monkeys because they are so much less noisy."[16] Totally incapable of comprehending Chu-yin, Marco, in a typically coarse and abrupt manner, grins condescendingly and says: "What's that – more philosophy? . . . Phew! I'll certainly be glad to get back home where I can hear some music that I can keep step to. My feet just won't give in to your tunes . . . . Still, I thought the band was a good idea – to sort of cheer up the Princess, and let people know she's leaving at the same time. See the crowd gather? I got them out of bed, too!" It is particularly interesting to watch Chu-yin's reaction at this point. Ironically, but quietly, he says "You also woke up the Princess."

This short exchange of remarks between Chu-yin, the subtle sage of China, and Marco, the rash philistine emissary of the West, sums up the impossibility of a real meeting of minds between the East and the West. For O'Neill the shallowness of the action-oriented West is incapable of comprehending the subtleties of the East whose wisdom lies in a quiet observance of the true course of nature. To Chu-yin, Marco should be given a chance to develop according to his own inclinations, and this attitude of wise passiveness is characteristically Taoist. But when he realizes that Marco is beyond being "house-broken," he simply gives up. Compared with Marco's actions as a Mayor of a small town, one realizes that Chu-yin belongs to a species altogether different. As an escort, Marco's behavior is equally marked by a sort of awkward meddling. The gathering of a huge crowd for the departing Princess is merely an outward show whose fanfare ironically disrupts the peace and quiet of the Princess. In a remarkably subtle manner, O'Neill thus manages to contrast the basically irreconcilable differences between the Taoist wisdom of the East and the superficiality of Western civilization.

A scene of such subtlety also reveals a few rather remarkable things

about O'Neill, the playwright. First of all, it expresses his sheer disgust with what Marco represents. For Marco, the wisdom and the beauty of the East, embodied in Chu-yin and Kukachin, are either ridiculous or inconsequential. What impresses him most is the "millions upon millions of millions of worms" of the silk industry that would generate "millions upon millions of capital."[17] Furthermore, what is worth noting is that O'Neill's disgust with Western civilization has taken on a certain degree of objectivity and detachment to enable him to go beyond his own immediate horizon. To be sure, the setting of the scene in the distant Orient may very well be no more than a theatrical device. But, when we look at his rather frequent references to the East and Taoism, and to the Tao House he built for the express purpose of obtaining some peace and quiet, we can assume that there was in him a genuine interest in the Taoist way of life.

Like his contemporary Ezra Pound, O'Neill felt that the Orient could provide certain guidelines that were badly needed in Western society. But for O'Neill, a lack of knowledge or conviction on the part of the West made a meeting of the two worlds far from possible. John Loving, for example, goes back to study Greek philosophy, Marco returns to Venice after his sojourn in China. The American playwright perhaps felt that Taoism, among other Eastern philosophies, could offer a cure for the ills of the materialistic West. But, like John Loving, O'Neill's belief in this cure was not strong enough for him to make a significant commitment. What he knew about the Tao and the East remained to be a fascination, however genuine it might have been. It was a gesture that signified both a defiance of and a detachment from his own immediate environment, a combination that is only possible in a writer whose feeling is as deep as his perspective is wide.

III

It is, of course, common knowledge that modern drama in China, the "enlightening drama" (文明戲, *wen-ming hsi*), or later the "spoken play" (話劇, *hua-chü*), is a genre that owes both its origin and subsequent development to Western drama and literature in general.

Since the organization in 1907 of China's first modern dramatic club, The Spring Willow Society (春柳社, *Ch'un-liu She*), Western-style

drama made its way into the Chinese cultural life through various adaptations and imitations of Western masterpieces. Among the numerous Western models – mostly Europeans such as Ibsen, Chekhov, Shaw, and Wilde – the only American playwright who has made a decisive and, to a certain degree, lasting impact on the Chinese dramatic scene is Eugene O'Neill. This is largely because O'Neill, during the formative years of modern Chinese drama from the early 1920's to the late 1930's, has attracted the attention of two highly influential playwrights, Hung Sheng and Ts'ao Yü.

Hung Sheng (洪深, 1894-1955), a pioneering figure in modern Chinese drama, was particularly interested in modern American drama; he had studied playwrighting at Harvard under Professor George P. Baker, the same teacher whose class O'Neill had attended four years earlier. One of Hung Sheng's best-known plays, *Chao – the King of Hell,* often called *The Yama Chao* (趙閻王), was in many ways modeled upon O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones.* As pointed out by David Y. Chen, who has made a detailed comparison of the two plays, Hung Sheng's *The Yama Chao* – written in 1922, two years after O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* – may even be considered a Chinese version of O'Neill's play. It borrowed from its American prototype the theme of money, the division of scenes, the use of soliloquies and, most importantly, the psychological treatment of hallucinations in a forest setting.[18] Hung Sheng found O'Neill's symbolic treatment of social and individual ills in *The Emperor Jones* congenial to his own purpose of staging social reform – more specifically, the predominantly male cast in O'Neill's play attracted Hung Sheng. We have the Chinese playwright's own reaction: "I am extremely disgusted at the male's impersonating female characters. It is perhaps because I have read too much of Freud's works on abnormal sexuality. Everytime I see a man putting on the make-up of a woman, I really feel like having goose-pimples all over me. But I still want to stage a play, and consequently the only thing I can do is to write a play which does not require female characters at all. This is one of the reasons why I made up my mind to borrow the form of O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* when the subject matter of *Chao* was decided upon."[19]

In fact, what is most strikingly O'Neillian about Hung Sheng's *Chao* is the increasingly extensive and symbolic use of the forest setting as the play gradually unfolds its inner drama. Out of the nine scenes in *Chao,* eight of them take place in the forest. Like its model, the physical setting

of the forest is employed with the express purpose of suggesting – as well as externalizing – the guilt-ridden psychic world of its main character, Chao Ta (趙大). Fear is common to Jones and Chao and, as the Czech critic Marián Gálik has pointed out, both plays are dramas of fear.[20]

Such resemblances between *The Emperor Jones* and *Chao* illustrate some of the characteristics of the early development of modern Chinese drama. It was a time when dependence on Western sources was so heavy that selective and hence sophisticated assimilation of the Western literary heritage was far from the common practise. The predominantly realistic purport of *Chao,* for instance, was found at times to be at odds with its overtly expressionistic form and setting, modeled largely after O'Neill.[21]

A decade or so later O'Neill found a more subtle and refined echo on the Chinese stage in the plays of Ts'ao Yü (曹禺 , 1909-), who succeeded Hung Sheng as the most powerful force in developing modern Chinese drama. The first and third part of the trilogy that earned Ts'ao Yü an astonishing success as a playwright, *Thunderstorm* (雷雨 , 1934) and *The Wilderness* (原野 , 1937), have been linked with O'Neill in terms of characterization and stagecraft. Even in the second play of the trilogy, *Sunrise* (日出 , 1936), which shows above all a variety of Chekhovian features, Ts'ao Yü openly acknowledges in the postscript that the idea of dividing the stage into two separate parts with a curtain to enable two sets of action to take place at the same time is derived from O'Neill's *Dynamo.*[22]

Aside from this admission, however, Ts'ao Yü has been on the whole rather reluctant to acknowledge his literary indebtedness. In his Preface to *Thunderstorm,* he disclaims any specific Western influence: "For while it is true that in the past ten years or so I have read quite a number of plays and even taken part in some performances myself, I cannot, however, recall exactly which part of my play was written in intentional imitation of which master. Possibly, in my subconsciousness, I have stolen threads and threads of golden yarn from the master's house, used them to mend my ugly and coarse garments and then denied that these discolored threads (for they now become mine) originally belonged to the master."[23] It is therefore left to the critics to trace the origins of those "threads of golden yarn" we find in Ts'ao Yü's plays. Both David Y. Chen (陳穎) and Joseph Lau (劉紹銘), especially the latter whose book on the Western influence on Ts'ao Yü appeared in 1970, have now clearly established that

some of the golden threads are distinctly taken from O'Neill although they may have been interwoven with other strands from different sources.

In the case of Ts'ao Yü's first play, *Thunderstorm,* its main character Chou Fan-yi (周蘩漪) is modeled upon Abbie Putnam in *Desire Under the Elms.*[24] Like Abbie, Fan-yi longs for her stepson. Their incestuous passion becomes a most eloquent and powerful expression of their defiance of traditional morals. O'Neill's elm-shaded farmhouse in puritanical New England is almost as hypocritical and morally suffocating as the family into which Fan-yi has married. I agree with Joseph Lau that Ephraim Cabot with his obsessive self-righteousness could be a model for Fan-yi's aging husband.[25]

In Ts'ao Yü's first experiment – when he was still awkwardly groping for his own voice – O'Neill along with Ibsen and Racine provided a particular kind of human situation for the Chinese playwright. The borrowing, although more selective than Hung Sheng's, seems to be somewhat superficial and hence superimposed so that Ts'ao Yü's characters fail to respond in a convincing way. It is not until *The Wilderness,* the last of the trilogy, that the playwright truly comes into his own, but this time it is a far more sophisticated and daring kind of imitation. Once again, O'Neill has proven to be the chosen master.

Although Ts'ao Yü is quiet about the genesis of his play, Lau reminds us that no reader familiar with *The Emperor Jones* can fail to notice the striking similarities between the two plays.[26] O'Neill's choice of the wild jungle as a setting for Brutus Jones' psychic fear becomes for Ts'ao Yü both an inspiration and a challenge.

Ts'ao Yü is inspired to make use of O'Neill's primordial jungles, the sound of the tom-tom in *The Wilderness* to probe into the psychic world of Ch'ou Hu (仇虎) – like Brutus Jones, an escaped convict. Following O'Neill, Ts'ao Yü invented a number of his own technical devices to enhance the dramatic and psychological effect of his play – devices often derived from his native Chinese tradition. For instance, the "bleedin" ceremony of the African war dance in *The Emperor Jones* is transformed into the ghastly ritual of the traditional Chinese "Soul Summoning" (招魂) accompanied by the thumping beat of the drums. Examples of such skillful transformation are rather numerous in *The Wilderness,* and the very process of such artful assimilation enables the artist to discover what is distinctly his own. It is not by way of Hung Sheng's extensive borrowing in *Chao*

– *The King of Hell* nor through the incestuous passion that Fan-yi harbors for her stepson in *Thunderstorm* that O'Neill exerts his lasting influence over the development of Chinese drama. It is in the primitive jungles of Ts'ao Yü's *The Wilderness* that O'Neill will be remembered as the first dramatist who inspired the transplantation of Western expressionism into Chinese drama.

Notes

1. Louis Sheaffer, *Son and Artist* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), p. 314.
2. Mai-mai Sze, painter and novelist, is the author of *The Tao of Painting: A Study of the Ritual Disposition of Chinese Painting* (1956). Her portrait of Eugene O'Neill, which is owned by the Museum of the City of New York, has often been reprinted.
3. Arthur and Barbara Gelb, *O'Neill* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 686.
4. Ibid., p. 825.
5. Ibid., p. 824.
6. Sheaffer, p. 472.
7. Gelb, p. 825.
8. Quoted in Carpenter, "Eugene O'Neill, the Orient, and American Transcendentalism," in *Eugene O'Neill: A Collection of Criticism,* ed. Ernest G. Griffin (Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1976), p. 42.
9. Gelb, p. 847.
10. Quoted by Joseph Wood Krutch, "Introduction," in Eugene O'Neill, *Nine Plays* (New York: Modern Library, 1954), xvii.
11. Ibid., xviii.
12. Doris Alexander, "*Strange Interlude* and Schopenhauer," *American Literature,* 25 (May 1953), pp. 213-228.
13. Barrett H. Clark, *Eugene O'Neill: The Man and His Plays* (New York: Dover, 1947), pp. 152-153.
14. John Henry Raleigh, *The Plays of Eugene O'Neill* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), p. 6.
15. An Min Hsia, "Eugene O'Neill and the Tao," Diss. Indiana University 1979.
16. This and the following two quotations are found in Eugene O'Neill, *Nine Plays* (New York: Modern Library, 1954), p. 267.
17. Ibid., p. 297.
18. David Y. Chen, "Two Chinese Adaptations of Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones,*" *Modern Drama,* 9 (1967), p. 432.
19. Ibid., note 2.
20. Marián Gálik, "*Chao – The King of Hell* and *The Emperor Jones:* Two Plays by Hung Sheng and O'Neill," *Asian and African Studies,* 12 (1976), p. 130.
21. Ibid.
22. David Y. Chen, "The Trilogy of Ts'ao Yü and Western Drama," *Asia and the*

Humanities (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1959), p. 34.

23. Joseph S. M. Lau, *Ts'ao Yü: The Reluctant Disciple of Chekhov and O'Neill* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1970), p. 8.
24. Ibid., p. 25.
25. Ibid., p. 21.
26. Ibid., p. 51.