

THE CHINESE INFLUENCE ON WESTERN THEATRE:
FROM TRANSPOSITION TO TRANSFORMATION

by

Hsieh Shun-liao
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ABSTRACT

The classical Chinese theatre has come to be recognized by Westerners as a well-preserved traditional theatrical form with unique features worthy of exploration. This thesis deals with some significant examples of the influence of Chinese theatre on Western contemporary theatre and attempts to establish the connections between them. The ways by which the techniques and essence of Chinese theatre are absorbed in the works of Thornton Wilder, Bertolt Brecht, and Jerzy Grotowski reflect various approaches employed in applying this foreign tradition. From the late eighteenth century to the latest few decades, the trend of this absorption has developed from borrowing and imitation to the transposition and transformation which occurred in the present century. Chinese dramatic techniques influenced the work of Wilder. Brecht learned to share with Chinese theatre the similar dramaturgy and the aesthetic concept of the art of acting. He also shared the same concern with social problems as the Chinese dramatists. The system and methods of Chinese actor's training have provided a significant part of the preliminary materials for Grotowski's research and exploration of the actor's art. A study of these influences of Chinese theatre and their transformation by the Western theatre artists also helps to understand the phenomenon of cultural exchange among diverse traditions, and to prepare a broader base from which meaningful new forms of theatre can develop.

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INTRODUCTION

The Chinese theatre was first introduced to the West in the eighteenth century. Research shows that the Chinese vogue was widespread in eighteenth-century European theatres. In the second half of the century many books dealt with a variety of subjects in Chinese culture flooded Europe. By the end of the century, theatrical works relating to China amounted to seventeen.¹ Among these works, however, only four plays about a Chinese orphan more or less retain the authenticity of a Chinese dramatic work. The rest range from humorous musical comedies, spectacles, and ballets to satirical skits. The four plays about a Chinese orphan are more significant than the others not only because of the degree of their authenticity but also because of the phenomenon of exchange they reveal.

The original Chinese Chao-shih ku-erh (The Orphan of Chao), a revenge play with themes of loyalty and self-sacrifice, was written in the thirteenth century by Chi Chun-hsiang, a dramatist of the Yuan dynasty (1277-1367). Though written six hundred years ago, the play already had many characteristics associated with those of the Peking opera today.

In 1731, the Jesuit priest Joseph Henri Premare translated the play into French as L'Orphelin de la Maison de Tchao.² Although Premare seemed to have touched upon the main stream of development of Chinese theatre, for Yuan drama marks the first florescence in Chinese theatre and provides the fundamental characteristics in playwriting for the

following ages; he, however, failed to translate the songs and the verse existing in the original. His translation, however, produced a stimulus in the theatre of Europe. In 1741 London saw William Hatchett's adaptation of this Chinese play entitled The Chinese Orphan: A Historical Tragedy³ as a political satire. In 1752 Pietro Metastasio, inspired by the story from reading Premare's translation, produced his court playlet L'Eroe cinese in Vienna.⁴ In 1755 Voltaire remolded and modified the Chinese piece and made an adaptation of moral comedy entitled L'Orphelin de la Chine.⁵

All these plays, though successively deriving their origin from a genuine Chinese play, reveal that Premare and his followers were only attracted to the subject material and its moral quality. No further effort was made to explore the features of the Chinese theatre; therefore, the significance never exceeded the realm of theatrical chinoiserie and exoticism.

In the eighteenth century, Jesuit priests served as an intellectual link between Europe and the Far East. When their influence diminished in the late eighteenth century, commercial interests began to dominate the European mind. As contacts become more frequent, unfavorable reports and judgments about the Chinese nation and people also increased. The fantastical Cathay of Exoticism and curiosity gradually transformed into a vision of a kingdom of barbarism in the minds of Europeans. The isolation and corruption of the late Ching dynasty (1644-1911) combined with this change of attitude resulted in there being only three Chinese theatrical pieces translated into European languages during this period.

John Francis Davis translated two Chinese plays into English, An Heir in His Old Age (Lao Sheng Erh) in 1817 and The Sorrow of Han (Han Kung Chiu) in 1829. In 1832, Stanislas Julien translated Hui Lan Chi (The Chalk Circle) into French: L'histoire de cercle de craie.⁶ Aside from the above three translations, almost no other absorption of a theatrical nature occurred in the nineteenth century.

The Chinese theatre had to wait until well into the twentieth century to recapture the attention of the West. A variety of speculations were rendered in the mind of Western theatrical practitioners in this century, covering such elements of Eastern theatre as stylization, symbolism, rhythm, poise, and imagination. Although Chinese theatre is only one of the major traditional forms of Oriental theatre, its influence on the contemporary Western theatre is manifested in multiple aspects. The Chinese dramaturgy inspired theatre innovators such as Bertolt Brecht and Thornton Wilder; the art of Chinese acting fascinated dominant theatrical practitioners such as Meyerhold, Brecht, and Jerzy Grotowski. Theatre scholar A. C. Scott devoted all his efforts to the introduction of authentic Chinese theatre to Western people through writing books, translating plays, teaching university courses, and conducting workshops.

The Chinese influence received by Western theatre in the present century seems to have undergone many stages of development. Looking at it only from the viewpoint of acting and actor's training, Robert L. Benedetti states:

The image of the "total" actor has been important throughout the history of our anti-realistic theatre tradition, from Meyerhold through Vakhtangov and Brecht, and especially from Artaud through Grotowski. Until Grotowski, however, the influence of oriental acting has often

been diffuse and generalized, based more on the idea of the oriental actor than upon the hard, even cruel realities which make what he is.⁷

Referring to a production of the Chinese play The Butterfly Dream done by A. C. Scott in 1961, Leonard C. Pronko suggests:

The rich theatricality exhibited by such texts as this, by productions like The Butterfly Dream, or by visiting Chinese troupes--whether in Paris, Moscow, or San Francisco--has suggested a variety of applications to Western dramatists, directors, and actors. Minimal sets and props; the ever-present but "invisible" prop men; acrobatic battle scenes; fantastic makeup; symbolic use of gait, gesture, makeup, space; exaggerated richness of costumes; movements rhythmically calculated and stressed by sounds and music--these and other techniques of the Chinese opera (and of other Oriental theatres as well) call to mind the experiments, and occasionally the successful re-creations, of men like Copeau, Dullin, Meyerhold, Barrault, Roger Planchon, Thornton Wilder, Bertolt Brecht, and Jean Genet.⁸

From the above two statements one may well detect that the art of Chinese theatre has been explored considerably by Westerners, and the trend has been moving from the stage of transposition to transformation.

Since the middle of this century, many studies on the relationship between Chinese and Western theatre have appeared. Nevertheless, these often dealt with a single dramatic work such as "The Original Chinese Orphan" by Liu Wu-chi,⁹ or an individual author such as Ts'ao Yu: The Reluctant Disciple of Chekhov and O'Neill by Joseph S. M. Lao.¹⁰ Two other more elaborate studies on an individual author are Renata Berg-Pan's Bertolt Brecht and China¹¹ dealing with Brecht's indebtedness to Chinese philosophy, poetry, and dramaturgy, and Antony Tatlow's The Mask of Evil,¹² a comparative and critical evaluation of Brecht's response to the poetry, theatre, and thought of China and Japan. Leonard C. Pronko's Theatre East and West is a study covering all the major forms

of Oriental theatre. Yet in the discussion of Chinese and Western theatre only Brecht and Genet are dealt with. Clara Yu Cuadrado's dissertation, "Chinese and Western Theatre: Contrasts, Cross-currents, and Convergences" is an effort to examine the modes of contact between two traditions. It explores the exchanges of these cross-cultural influences, and demonstrates the trends toward a convergence revealed in the case of Brecht. Her conclusion seems to overlook the ongoing current in Western theatre toward the transformation of Oriental influence, which is particularly characterized by Grotowski's theatre. A most recent study on the connection between Chinese and the contemporary Western theatre is Chi Wei-jan's "The Chinese Opera: Contemporary Western and Chinese Perspectives."¹³ Chi's thesis examines first the Chinese influence on Brecht and Genet, which can be considered as an extension of Pronko's study. The second part of his thesis deals with the development of hua-chü (spoken drama) in the present century with emphasis on the theatrical activities which have occurred in Taiwan after 1949.

Inspired by the above studies, the present study differs from them in that it examines some significant examples of Chinese influence on the works of contemporary Western theatre, and establishes the connections between them. Since the Chinese influence may be regarded as part of the general Eastern influence on Western theatre, I have limited by discussion to the traceable influences and applicable instances from the Chinese tradition. Also the Chinese influence has not always been seen in biographical materials or historical accounts, therefore both extrinsic and intrinsic approaches are employed in this study.

The thesis consists of four chapters. Chapter I, "The Conventions of Chinese Theatre," presents a foundation for the discussions in the following three chapters. It provides a brief description of the development of Chinese theatre as a whole from its origins up to the present century. It also deals with the conventional characteristics including aesthetic view, stage and stagecraft, acting, audience participation, music, language, and material. Furthermore, the examples based on Chinese actors' experience are given to illustrate the art of Chinese acting and the process of actor's training.

Chapter II, "The Dramatic Techniques of Thornton Wilder and Chinese Drama," is a study of Wilder's works, especially Our Town and The Skin of Our Teeth, with emphases on dramatic structure and theatrical devices. The reason for choosing Wilder is that he, similar to Brecht, was inspired by Chinese theatre in his innovation against the realistic and naturalistic theatre of the time quite possibly through his own study and Brecht's practice.

Chapter III, "Bertolt Brecht and Chinese Theatre," deals in the first section with aspects of Chinese influence such as thought, dramaturgy, and theatrical devices on Brecht's plays, especially The Good Woman of Setzuan and The Caucasian Chalk Circle. The second section is a discussion and evaluation of Brecht's response to the art of Chinese acting as revealed in his theatrical writings. Brecht is chosen for the reason that he seemed to have assimilated the art of Chinese theatre to serve his own art. His case reveals a phenomenon of Chinese influence on Western theatre gradually moving away from superficial imitation and borrowing.

Chapter IV, "Jerzy Grotowski and Chinese Theatre," deals with how Grotowski integrated Western modes and Chinese influence into a cultured and universal art with regard to the techniques and science of acting. Grotowski, who has studied Chinese theatre and many other traditions of theatrical practice, exemplifies the stage of transformation of Chinese theatrical practices. Since he has received many other influences from the Oriental theatres, such as Indian Kathakali and Japanese Noh, my discussion will be limited to those elements similar to or relating to Chinese theatre.

The major problem encountered in this study has been the lack of reference materials concerning Wilder's and Grotowski's contact with Chinese theatre. Moreover, no firsthand research materials are available, therefore some of the discussion can be approached only indirectly. I am compelled to rely on secondary accounts, and indirect means. It should also be mentioned that the Chinese influence is not always revealed simultaneously in practice and concept. Sometimes it is manifested in text through its subject matter, or structural pattern, while at other times it is more apparent in the style of acting or in the actor's training system. Consequently, I have employed different perspectives for different cases.

The term "Chinese theatre" is used in the present study to stand for the classical Chinese theatre. It is used in a comprehensive sense, because it encompasses all schools of theatrical practice at different periods growing out of the same cultural background. The Romanization of Chinese is based on the Wade-Giles system accepted in the U. S. and Taiwan. Those names and titles which are already accepted in the English

language are used accordingly. The Chinese names are presented in Chinese manner, having the family name first followed by the given name. Chinese theatrical terms and titles of plays are given in Romanized Chinese first and then in English translation in parenthesis. Several passages quoted or excerpted from Chinese sources in the fourth chapter are translated by me.

NOTES

¹ Clara Yu Cuadrado, "Chinese and Western Theatre: Contrasts, Cross-currents, and Convergences," Diss. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1978, pp. 25-26.

² Ibid., p. 29.

³ Ibid., p. 33.

⁴ Ibid., p. 34.

⁵ Ibid., p. 36.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 41-46.

⁷ Robert L. Benedetti, "What We Need to Learn from the Asian Actor," Educational Theatre Journal, 25, No. 4 (December 1973), p. 465.

⁸ Leonard C. Pronko, Theater East and West (California: University of California Press, 1974), p. 55.

⁹ Liu Wu-chi, "The Original Chinese Orphan," Comparative Literature, 5, No. 3 (Summer 1953), pp. 193-212.

¹⁰ Joseph S. M. Lao, Ts'ao Yu: The Reluctant Disciple of Chekhov and O'Neill (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1970).

¹¹ Renata Berg-Pan, Bertolt Brecht and China (Bonn: Bouvier, 1979).

¹² Antony Tatlow, The Mask of Evil (Bern: Verlag Peter Lang, 1977).

¹³ Chi Wei-jan, "The Chinese Opera: Contemporary Western and Chinese Perspectives," Thesis, University of Kansas, 1982.

CHAPTER I
THE CONVENTIONS OF CHINESE THEATRE

Most scholars have believed that Chinese theatre took its origin from shamanistic religious ceremonies. The assumption leading to this conclusion is that the development of theatre follows the natural course of evolution. However, William Dolby, in his article, "Early Chinese Plays and Theatre,"¹ has recognized the various elements in the artistic development of Chinese theatre during the early periods. In addition to shamanism he discusses many other antecedents of Chinese theatre. It is useful to summarize Dolby's article at this point, because the elements he has perceived closely relate to some of the conventions existing in today's traditional Chinese theatre.

Dolby's article plausibly assumes that the antecedent of Chinese theatre is the synthesis of various elements. The following is a list of factors as presented by Dolby:

1. The Shang dynasty (traditionally 1766-1122 B.C.): religious rites performed by the shaman through singing and dancing to invoke spirits or to entertain.

2. The Chou dynasty (1027-256 B.C.): ritual dance, combining singing, dancing, and costume in the imperial court and temples; warrior dance, revealing a fairly full story and the use of dancing, singing, gestures, stage properties, and costumes; the jesters' performance in the court, involving singing, gestures, actions, and dressing up, functioning

as entertainment, advice, instruction, and warning through humor and satire.

3. The Han dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 220): the "Horn butting game," revealing the imitation of animals and hunting episodes.

4. The T'ang dynasty (618-907): T'ang dances with movements similar to those of Peking opera performers; adjutant plays, offering the use of role categories; Bianwen (texts of the unusual), providing storytelling in the manner of mixing speech and song; Chuangi (marvel tales), offering story sources and narrative; the establishment of the Academy of the Pear Garden by T'ang Ming-huang (714-754) as a training institution of performing arts.

The above elements correspond to some of the important features in today's Chinese theatre: the use of gestural and mimetic techniques; the lack of differentiation between dance and drama; the function of a performance as both entertainment and instruction; the oral narrative device; and the k'o-pan (training school) system.

During the Sung dynasty (960-1279), a variety of plays were developed, and the theatre began to thrive as part of the entertainment world. The most renowned scholar of Chinese theatre, Ch'i Ju-shan, has pointed out that although Chinese theatre has absorbed various elements, its definite structure and mode began to take shape in Sung dynasty.² A. C. Scott has also mentioned that Yuan drama "includes developments which had their beginning in the Sung dynasty."³

In many respects, theatre in the Sung dynasty already possessed the main characteristics of today's Chinese theatre, such as the use of song suites; the telling of long and full tales in dramatic fashion;

the alternation of prose and verse, speech and song; the extensive use of direct speech; the use of gorgeous costumes; the variety of props; and the use of makeup. The contents and themes of the plays ranged widely, as did the character type. The performances extended from the court to the public parks, where stages or theatres were erected.

The Sung dynasty paved the way for the first florescence of Chinese theatre in the Yüan dynasty (1279-1368). From then on, the theatre began to develop at full speed through the Ming (1368-1644) and Ch'ing (1644-1911) dynasties. Chinese drama was not created to any set rules until the Yüan period. The Yüan Tsa-chü (miscellany play) provided a model for play construction, and is "considered as the oldest form of complete drama in China."⁴ Yüan drama developed two different styles, usually referred to as the two schools, Southern and Northern drama. The Southern style was characterized by its poetic and refined quality, exemplified by use of the plaintive flute as its musical instrument. The Northern style, on the other hand, was free from the rules of prosody, and used string instruments to accompany the singing. The two schools continued to thrive until the beginning of the Ming dynasty, when a development of the Southern drama, Ch'uan-chi, began to attract public interest, and the Northern school waned.

In the middle of the Ming dynasty, collaboration between a dramatist, Liang Po-lung, and a musician, Wei Liang-fu, brought about a dramatic style called k'un-ch'ü, a synthesis of different branches of the Southern school. K'un-ch'ü dominated theatrical practice until the nineteenth century when it was replaced by ching-hsi. Often referred

to as Peking Opera, ching-hsi combines techniques of various styles, and has been popular from the Ch'ing period to the present.

The basic difference between k'un-ch'ü and ching-hsi is similar to that of Southern drama and Northern drama in the Yüan period. The former uses the flute for song accompaniment, and the latter uses stringed instruments. The dramatists of k'un-ch'ü were men of letters whose works aimed at satisfying readers as well as spectators. Ching-hsi was devised by actors whose emphasis was on visual effects.

The development of Chinese theatre has undergone many stages of change, and eventually become a national theatre. Among the many theatre traditions in the world, Chinese theatre is one of the most well preserved. The following is a discussion about the conventions of Chinese theatre, which include dramaturgy, stage, stagecraft, character types, costume, language, music, actor's techniques, actor's training, and the actor-audience relationship. It should be understood that a discussion in a limited scope such as this is not able to avoid some generalization.

The structural devices of Chinese drama have been influenced by certain conventions from the oral narrative tradition. In discussing the Yüan plays, Chung-wen Shih asserted that the heritage of the story-telling device has made many contributions to the form of Yüan drama. These include: the opening verse for revealing the identity and character of the speaker; the use of self-identification and explanatory monologue as a device for exposition of characters and events; the use of a narrator for direct communication with the audience; the device of alternating prose and verse; the use of recapitulation for occasional summing up of the plot; and the use of concluding couplet for summing up the story.⁵

As for structural division, Chung-wen Shih has pointed out:

Of the 171 extant Yüan plays, 165 consist of four acts, and only six of five acts. An additional shorter unit called the "wedge" (hsieh-tzu) may be placed before any of the regular acts, thus functioning as a prologue or interlude.⁶

In some Yüan plays, the four acts correspond to the progression from exposition, to development, climax, and denouement. The majority of them, however, do not have a linear progression; the dramatic structure tends to be episodic or static. Due to the episodic nature or the emphasis on performance rather than on story, "even on the Chinese classical stage today an evening's performance generally consists of many scenes from different plays; only on rare occasions will a play be presented in its entirety."⁷

Although only Yüan plays have been chosen for the above discussion, the basic structure of Chinese plays has been in accord with this pattern since the Yüan period. A few historical stories have been developed into more lengthy plays, such as Ch'un Ying Hui (The Meeting of Many Heroes). Their structural devices, however, did not go beyond the conventions of Yüan plays.

The physical construction of a Chinese stage may seem simple and crude to Westerners who have been accustomed to elaborate theatre architecture. Furthermore, questions may be raised about why, with such a long theatre history, China has never developed an elaborate theatre comparable to, for instance, that of the Italian Renaissance period. Relevant answers to this question should resort to aesthetic principles and the nature of theatrical activities of Chinese theatre. First,

throughout history the Chinese theatre has never strived to provide an illusionary impression on stage. A stage is simply considered as a defined area for performance. As is suggested by A. C. Scott, "the stage [is] conceived as a plastic area in which to achieve spatial precision at the total expense of theatrical illusion."⁸ Secondly, the performances have been given not only in permanent teahouses but also in many other places such as private houses, banquet halls, village squares, and temple yards.

During the Ch'ing dynasty, the following two kinds of theatre were most popular. One was known as yeh-t'ai-hsi, meaning theatre in an open space, with a temporary two-storied structure, the first floor being used as the dressing room, the second floor as the stage. The other was the permanent stage developed in teahouse. A typical teahouse theatre was rectangular in shape, with a stage protruding from one end, and the audience was seated on the three surrounding sides. The central portion of the seating area was occupied by tables and benches. The stage was essentially little more than a raised platform with a red or black lacquered pillar at each front corner to support the projecting wooden roof. A beautifully embroidered curtain with an opening on each side was hung at the back of the stage. The opening on stage right served as an entrance, the other as an exit. The curtain upstage separated the onstage and backstage areas, and indicated the environment of a performance. No front curtain was used to hide the stage from the direct view of the audience. The stage was bare except for a carpet in the center, on which sat a table and two chairs.

The scenery, setting, and other physical surroundings are called into being by the actor's mime and pantomime, the symbolic use of props, or multiple combinations of the table and chairs. Ch'i Ju-shan describes more than twenty different arrangements of the table-and-chair set.⁹ Each of them suggests a specific setting. For example, one or two chairs put against a large hanging indicates a bedroom. Landscape is also conjured up by the actor. For example, to indicate getting in a boat, "the actor jumps forward and while resting on the floor his body sways gracefully back and forth, in harmony with the up and down movements in the knees."¹⁰ Through the actor's symbolic action, the audience immediately realizes that the stage is turned into a river or a sea.

The stage decor of Chinese theatre is reduced to minimum, governed by the idea of simplicity and economy. The use of props is also economized, intending to represent the objects or scenery without making them realistic. In her Secrets of Chinese Drama, Cecilia S. L. Zung has selected twenty items for discussion, among which most are made of cloth and are symbolically used. A few examples are: a whip representing horseback riding; a pair of flags with wheels painted on them, which stand for a chariot; a small paddle symbolizing boating; a lantern held by an attendant suggesting walking in the dark.¹¹ The purpose of these props is to assist the dancing movements of the actor. If realistic properties or scenery were placed on the stage, they would simply become incongruous obstacles to the actor's stylized acting and the style of the theatre itself.

In contrast to the stage and props, the costume and makeup are rich in color and bold in style. The reason for this sharp contrast

is probably that Chinese theatre is an actor-centered theatre. The costume is designed to reveal the essential quality of a character, and also to create visual interest. The character, age, and social status of the roles are represented by a conventionalized set of color, pattern, textures, and accessories. The makeup, often referred to the "painted-face" role, is based upon a specific color scheme and set of patterns. Face painting is generally done with a combination of colors and patterns. Again, the facial design, like costume, is chiefly done to represent the temperament of the character.

The actor's roles in Chinese theatre are classified into four major categories: Sheng, male characters; tan, female characters; ching, the painted-face characters; and ch'ou, the clowns. Under each category there are several subtypes. Each type of character is endowed with a particular characterization, and is endowed with particular techniques of acting, costume, and makeup. For example, the female role (tan) is subdivided into the military type, wu-tan, and the civilian types, ch'ing-i and hua-tan. As described by Colin Mackerras:

The wu-tan, or military tan, must, like her male counterpart, be a good acrobat. The main civilian tan was the ch'ing-i, who was the faithful wife or lover or virtuous daughter. The actor sang with a fairly high falsetto voice, his movements were graceful and his eyes normally lowered. Ch'ing-i characters did not take part in fighting or acrobatics. The hua-tan, or 'flower' tan, was a 'faster' woman. The player was very coquettish in his movements and gestures, and his costumes more stylish than those of ch'ing-i. There was great emphasis on facial and eye expression, and on methods of smiling and laughing.¹²

The language in Chinese drama can be divided into two kinds: ch'ang (song) and pai (speech). Although pai is very close to everyday conversation, it still has to be delivered in poetic quality of rhythm

and tone. The vocal quality is so strongly emphasized that every utterance must maintain the quality of a song. Usually, more than half of a play is sung in verse, and every intonation of a sentence and even every pitch of a word is conventionalized. Voice styles vary according to character types. Of the four major role types, sheng and tan require the most sophisticated singing techniques.

Musical accompaniment to the singing is produced by a small orchestra which is placed on stage, in full view of the audience. Musical instruments are classified into the string, wind, and percussion categories. The string and wind instruments are used to accompany the "civil" plays which depict domestic and social life with emphasis on singing techniques. The percussion instruments belong to the "military" plays which deal with tales of military distinction, stressing acrobatic display and the dynamic beauty of dance movement. The musical accompaniment has many functions. It sets the tempo for the play, marks scene divisions, and creates special effects to attract the audience's attention to specific movements of the actor.

The body movements of a Chinese actor involve the most profound and complicated of techniques. Everything an actor does with his body must contain the elegance of dance, and is meticulously stylized. Ch'i Ju-shan gives a list of eighty ways of getting on stage, fifty-eight ways to exit, fifty-three ways to "stage walk," seventy-two methods of sleeve movement, fifty ways of hand movement, and twenty-seven ways of smiling and laughing.¹³ Each of these movements symbolically represents a specific physical action or emotion. No matter how trivial, these movements should be danced out. For example,

When an actor enters an imaginary door he lifts his foot as if stepping over the threshold. . . . Horse riding is symbolized by manipulating a tassel which represents the whip.¹⁴

Weeping is symbolized by holding the sleeve in front of the eyes but not touching the face. When her right hand is bent with the long cuff hiding the face and her head turned away looking downwards, she is embarrassed. When a young girl bites her sleeve without saying a word, she is in love.¹⁵

The conventions governing the Chinese theatre are like the prosody restraining the composition of a poem. The stage itself, the use of props, song, movement, costume, and makeup, as well as the musical accompaniment are combined by a strict formality to create a harmony of aural and visual effect. No one of these elements may be sacrificed at the expense of the others. As is pointed out by A. C. Scott:

In the Chinese theatre, any slight deviation from the visual pattern, either in physical appearance of the actor, his movements and costume, or in the stage ensemble, detracts from the completeness of the entertainment to jar upon the sensibilities of the experienced playgoer with the imperfections produced.¹⁶

It is of importance to understand that even if all the elements in Chinese theatre connect organically, without the actor, the organism would lose its function and could not be translated into a theatrical language. The actor's techniques have fascinated many of the dominant theatrical practitioners in Western theatre. The importance of a Chinese actor's techniques cannot be overevaluated. As A. C. Scott comments:

The actor's technique is the crux of the whole entertainment, the play itself is a vehicle which uses a hollowed theme presented in a fashion best calculated to create situations in which the virtuoso quality of the actor may be used to the maximum advantage, it is around his skill and talent that the whole thing revolves.¹⁷

The training program usually covers seven years of total commitment. Students are sent to k'o-pan (training school) or to a private teacher at the age of seven. When a student first starts the training, no decision is reached as to the type of character for which he or she is to be trained. Therefore, for every student the first year is completely devoted to physical exercises and basic acrobatics. After the first year, each is assigned to one of the four major categories. Although the prospective role type has been assigned to each student, the basic acrobatics remain to be practiced by every student twice a day for remaining years. Beside the basic acrobatics, the acrobatic students practice movement and martial arts, and the singing students practice singing.

During the training years, the students lead a monastic life. The well known Chinese tan actor Mei Lan-fang, in recalling his training days, describes:

Every morning at five, he (the teacher) took me out into the open air for a walk and to train my voice. After lunch another teacher would arrive to give me vocal training after which I practiced stage movements and learned tunes. The evening I spent studying libretto. Except for eating and sleeping, I worked hard all day long.¹⁹

Even when an actor graduates from the training school, the discipline in everyday life remains very demanding if an actor wants to keep in good physical condition.

Some of the methods in training are so severe that they even reach the point of cruelty and inhumanity. Referring to the training for physical balance and endurance, Mei Lan-fang says:

I remember using a long bench for exercises when I was quite young. A brick was placed on the bench and standing on it with little

stilts attached to my feet I tried to remain on the brick for the time it takes to burn a stick of incense. When I first started, my legs trembled and it was torture. . . . But after some time, my back and legs developed the proper muscles and I gradually learned to stand on the brick quite steadily.

In winter I practised fighting and pacing around on ice while wearing short stilts. At first I slipped easily, but once I became accustomed to walking on stilts over the ice, it was effortless to go through the same motions on stage without the stilts.²⁰

The idea underlying these exercises is that through kinetic and kinesthetic experiences the actor is able to surmount physical weakness and barriers. Since the training starts in youth and lasts many years, the theatrical or non-theatrical disciplines feed into the instinct which makes an actor capable of operating his energy freely on any occasion. As Robert L. Benedetti put it: ". . . the actor's physical techniques become the instruments of a spiritual discipline."²¹ Moreover, the actor not only masters the skills of singing, dancing, and acrobatic, but he also synthesizes these skills into an organic whole. "The completeness of the Chinese actor's training allows him to utilize his full 'dynamic essence' in his performance."²²

The training process in Chinese theatre is also a rehearsal process. After the students have been equipped with the basic skills, the instructors start to teach them to perform the assigned roles. The plays chosen for teaching are arranged in order from those demanding simple skills to those requiring complex and sophisticated techniques. In recalling her learning process, one Peking opera performer says:

the teacher would say a line; we students would repeat the line. Every line, every movement was memorized, never to be forgotten. This was very difficult because one not only had to remember one's own lines in the play, one had to remember everyone else's; we learned the complete play.²³

Mei Lan-fang also mentioned that "each passage had to be sung twenty or thirty times."²⁴ In this way, rehearsal goes hand-in-hand with training, and the actor is always ready for performance; so that he is not overwhelmed by orientation to the "opening night."

Some of the actors are able to be involved in or to watch public performances every day during their apprenticeship. The experiences they gain from the performances can always enhance the actor's art. Mei Lan-fang mentioned that "this method of linking one's own studies for the theatre with watching the performance of actors is a must for every artist who wishes to improve his art."²⁵

It is a truism that a theatre without audience cannot exist. The actor-spectator relationship has been one of the most concerned issues in Western theatre during recent decades. The situation of the audience in a Chinese theatre may amaze a Westerner.

The Chinese playgoers come to the "tea house" for a treat of the senses and for a social event; they meet friends discuss business, and enjoy leisure in a relaxed and congenial atmosphere, over a dish of watermelon seeds and a cup of steaming tea.²⁶

In tune with the implication of the above passage, Pronko describes:

The Oriental spectator, whether in China, Japan, or Bali, attends the theater as though it were a part of life, not a place set apart. In the same way that he relaxes at a picnic, becomes involved in it in a natural way, so he participates in his theater, where he feels at home. . . . There is an atmosphere of joy and conviviality at theatrical performances in the East.²⁷

On the surface, the performers on stage and the audience in the seats seem to be separated, and the audience seems to be indifferent about the performance. But, nevertheless, the audience is actually

fully aware of the dramatic situation, and participates enthusiastically and seriously in the performance. Their response of approval and disapproval is delivered by gestures, applause, and the exchange of comments, constituting a vital part of the performance. Without this constant and immediate feedback from the audience, the performance would lose most of its vivacity. The performers also respond to the audience's participation. They often invite attention to and judgment of their art by displaying their best skills. In this way, the audience's immediate response punctuates the performance, and the performance continues with perfect rhythm.

The Chinese theatre has a long history, and has developed into an integrated tradition. Through hundreds years of stage practice, all the conventional elements have been welded together into what may be called a "language" of the theatre shared by the Chinese audience. In modern times, several new theatrical forms have been developed in China. Hua-chü (spoken drama) in the Western style was introduced to China early in this century. The Yango theatre, developed from the simple peasant rice-planting dance, was once popular in the 1950's; the politically oriented "model opera" developed in the 1970's. With the exception of hua-chü, these new experiments, however, seem to be tentative, because their existence depends primarily on the political climate.

Hua-chü is usually known as Chinese modern theatre and drama. Its form in playwriting and the manner of production are similar to Western realistic theatre and drama. Its development has been encouraged by the new intellectuals. Presently, in Taiwan, it overshadows traditional theatre. In recent years, the practitioners of modern theatre

in Taiwan, after long years of imitating Western theatre, have begun to seek inspiration from the classical Chinese theatrical heritage. For more detail about theatrical activities and development in Taiwan after 1949, the reader may refer to Chi Wei-jan's study.²⁸

Nevertheless, the classical Chinese theatre continues to be practiced. Currently, there are five training academies in Taiwan, and performances are given regularly. They have contributed greatly to the survival and revival of the classical theatre. The training basically follows the traditional system, but the curriculum has been expanded to include other fields of study, such as foreign language, Chinese literature, mathematics, history, geography, and so forth. Owing to the change in the taste and the popularity of television and films, the audience for traditional theatre has gradually decreased. In the future, experimental works developed along the lines of hua-chü are very likely to become the mainstream of theatrical development in Taiwan.

NOTES

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CHAPTER II
THE DRAMATIC TECHNIQUES OF THORNTON WILDER AND
CHINESE DRAMA

Theatre historians Oscar G. Brockett and Robert R. Findlay write: "Of all the American playwrights of the interwar years, Thornton Wilder, with the possible exception of O'Neill, now enjoys the greatest international reputation."¹ Such a claim may seem a little surprising when one realizes that Wilder's reputation as a dramatist rests almost entirely on three plays, Our Town, The Skin of Our Teeth, and The Matchmaker. However, if considered within the context of theatrical development, Wilder's position as an innovator against the then established realistic and naturalistic theatre is important.

In the Preface to his Three Plays, Wilder expresses his dissatisfaction with the box-set stage developed in the nineteenth century, which, as he points out, is "inadequate" and "evasive," and "stifles the life in drama." He further states: "The theatre has lagged behind the other arts in finding the 'new ways' to express how men and women think and feel in our time."² It is these "new ways" of expression demonstrated in his plays which affirm the position of his work in contemporary drama. To quote Brockett and Findlay again: ". . . Wilder's importance cannot be questioned, for perhaps more so than other dramatists he has demonstrated how utter simplicity of subject and means may be fashioned into a compelling theatricality."³

Born in Madison, Wisconsin in 1897, but spending part of his early years in Hong Kong (1906) and China (1911-13), Thornton Wilder has been said to have "derived the techniques for his illusionless primary theatre from the Chinese art of acting."⁴ Travis Bogard also says: "A boyhood in the Orient had undoubtedly taught him something of the freedom and scope of the oriental drama."⁵ These statements may result from some imaginary presupposition that Wilder had witnessed the performances of Chinese theatre during his stay in Hong Kong and China. But reliable evidence about Wilder's contact with Chinese theatre is very limited. Moreover, according to Wilder's biographer, Richard H. Goldstone, Wilder, having been sent to a German school in Shanghai, was very isolated from Chinese society.⁶

Nevertheless, it seems evident that Wilder had already been familiar with the art of Chinese theatre before he composed his plays. In his "Some Thoughts on Playwriting," he mentions, ". . . that a whip in the hand and a jogging motion of the body indicated that a man was on horseback in the Chinese theatre. . . ."⁷ Later, in the Preface to his Three Plays, a similar remark was also stated.⁸ Therefore, I presume that the following comment made by Jean Gould about the relationship between Wilder and Chinese theatre seems more convincing than the others.

Contrary to accepted impression, Thornton Wilder never saw a Chinese or Japanese play while he lived in the Orient. Not until Mei Lang Fang came to America [1930] on his famous tour did the playwright see Chinese acting or plays, although he had known of the forms through his reading on the Oriental theater long before he witnessed that particular performance.⁹

Apparently, with such limited and indefinite biographical references, a discussion about the direct influence of Chinese theatre on Wilder's works is impossible, and will be proved futile. However, a study with an intrinsic approach, concentrating on the features of the works themselves, seems feasible because the evidence of Wilder's kinship with Chinese theatre lies in his plays themselves.

This study will mention some of the similar and different characteristics between two theatres, without attempting to argue Chinese influence. In examining Wilder's works, it will reveal that the dramatic techniques employed by Wilder have much in common with those in Chinese theatre and drama. These techniques have to do with theatricalism, stagecraft, dramatic structure, narrative method, and characterization. The following discussion will focus on these common techniques and links, which might lead to a better understanding of the elements in spirit akin to Chinese theatre in Wilder's works. Among Wilder's works, only his three one-act plays written in 1931, The Long Christmas Dinner, Pullman Car Hiawatha, and The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden; and two full-length plays, Our Town (1935) and The Skin of Our Teeth (1942) are chosen for the discussion, because these plays show a logical development in dramatic technique of his works.

Theatricalism as it applies to Wilder restores the theatre's reality as theatre while destroying the illusion of reality. In the Preface to his Three Plays, Wilder writes:

No great age in theatre ever attempted to create the audiences' belief through . . . specification and localization. I became dissatisfied with the theatre [naturalistic theatre] because I was unable to lend credence to such childish attempts to be "real."¹⁰

He further claims:

The stage is fundamental pretense and it thrives on the acceptance of that fact and in the multiplication of additional pretenses. When it tries to assert that the personages in the action "really are," really inhabit such and such rooms, really suffer such and such emotions, it loses rather than gains credibility.¹¹

Instead of attempting to imitate reality, and to achieve the exact reproduction of life, Wilder was constantly seeking to present the perception of reality through symbol. His dramatic works consistently reflect an indifference for the routine practices and limitations of the realistic theatre. In his theatre, the embellishments are stripped, and the stage is reduced to very simple and essential elements. Characterization is minimized and treated as types representing abstractions rather than psychologically well-motivated, well-rounded characters. The unity of time and place is not observed. The effect of theatre Wilder strives for is to enable the audience to perceive the essential reality. The theatre power, as he puts it, is to heighten "the exhibited individual action into the realm of idea and type and universal[ity] that is able to evoke our belief."¹²

As a consequence, Wilder's theatre imposes itself heavily upon its audience's imagination. He rebelled against the naturalistic theatre on grounds that it deprived the audience of any kind of participation other than a strictly emotional one. In illustrating this point, Wilder draws upon the Greek play Medea as example:

For the Greeks, . . . there was no pretense that Medea was on the stage. The mask, the costume, the mode of declamation, were a series of signs which the spectator interpreted and resembled in his mind. Medea was being re-created within the imagination of each of the spectators.¹³

Wilder's tendency toward theatricalism is clearly revealed from the time he wrote his one-act plays. In The Long Christmas Dinner, time is telescoped; pantomime is employed to supply the missing real properties; characters are stock characters. In Pullman Car Hiawatha, the stage decor is discarded; the play is "directed" by a stage manager. The same simplicity of subject and style also appears in The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden, in which, again, a stage manager directs the play; no scenery is required; characters are types. All these features departing from realism converge in Our Town and The Skin of Our Teeth which will be closely examined later in this chapter.

The theatricalism characterized by Wilder coincides with Chinese theatre in many respects. As has been discussed in the previous chapter, throughout history Chinese theatre has never strived to achieve an illusionary stage. Its lack of heavily built-up naturalistic illusion aims at a larger-than-life style of presentation. A well-known Chinese stage and film director Tso Lin suggests:

A play is a play; it is frankly theatre. For this, we [Chinese] have created a set of conventions to break through the limitations of time and space so that life may appear more free and sublime on the stage.¹⁴

A. C. Scott also comments:

A small wooden table, two chairs, a carpet, and a rear curtain through which the actors make their exits and entries are the only scenic necessities for an open area that can be expanded or contracted at will, without minimizing a calculated awareness of space and disregard for illusion that reveals the craft of acting at its source.¹⁵

Chinese theatre is flexible in operation of time and place, because its

bare stage does not confine its scope. The missing details of setting and scenery are conjured up by the actor's mime and pantomime or by the symbolic use of props. Characters are classified by a set convention; they appear to be types. The ultimate aim is to present the essence of life rather than trivalities.

In discussing style and stylization, Michael Saint-Denis maintains:

Theatre is not life, theatre is theatre. . . . To reveal life the theatre cannot use the means of life. It has got to use the means of theatre. The Chinese say it is not doors that are interesting, but what happens behind them: so why have doors?¹⁶

Saint-Denis' statement implies that life in the theatre requires theatrical transposition. To achieve this theatrical transposition, both Wilder's theatre and Chinese theatre share a great number of common theatrical devices.

Stagecraft is the first key to understanding Wilder's theatre. It provides a frame for the other dramatic techniques to operate. In referring to Our Town, Wilder claims: "Our claim, our hope, our despair are in the mind--not in things, not in 'scenery.' Moliere said that for the theatre all he needed was a platform and a passion or two."¹⁷ The attempt to eliminate the unnecessary and insignificant embellishments on stage, so as to gain the freedom and scope of staging, is demonstrated in most of his plays. At the beginning of Pullman Car Hiawatha, the stage direction reads:

At the back of the stage is a balcony or bridge or runaway leading out of sight in both directions. Two flights of stairs descend from it to the stage. There is no further scenery.¹⁸

No scenery is required for The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden.

The first directions for Our Town are:

No curtain.

No scenery.

The audience, arriving, sees an empty stage in half-light.¹⁹

From the above description, one can easily detect that Wilder's theatre is theatre which draws attention to itself as theatre. One can also imagine that his theatre is, at first glance, open for something to happen.

Furnishings in Wilder's theatre are either eliminated or replaced by a few token articles of furniture, symbolically suggesting to the audience's imagination that which is missing. The use of stage properties is in accord with the symbolic attempt to present reality. In Pullman Car Hiawatha, several chairs represent the berth for the passengers. In The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden, four kitchen chairs stand for an automobile. In Our Town, two sets of chairs and tables serve as the kitchen, indicating two families. Stepladders help to suggest the second floor, and a plank serves as a bar. A few rows of chairs stand for graves. More rows of chairs, together with the projection of a small lancet window on the stage's back wall, represent the village church. A few umbrellas are used to suggest rain.

In Wilder's plays, pantomime frequently replaces realistic movements of actor, which allows the audience's imagination and creativity to participate in the actions of the plays. In The Long Christmas Dinner, the characters are required to continue eating imaginary food with imaginary knives and forks throughout the performance. In Our

Town, instances are innumerable: Mrs. Gibbs pulls up an imaginary window shade in her kitchen and starts to make an imaginary fire in an imaginary stove; the milkman comes along the street, walking beside an invisible horse and wagon, and carrying an imaginary rack with milk bottles; the newspaper boy hurls imaginary papers; and so forth. In Pullman Car Hiawatha, despite the absence of any visible representation of a railroad car, we nevertheless "see" one through the actors' reactions to the swaying and lurching of the train. In some cases, the "setting" is simply made into existence by the description of a stage manager, delivered directly to the audience. The locale is, therefore, reproduced by the audience's imagination.

It is clear that Wilder, through his method of staging, has constantly sought to achieve a sense of an ultimate perspective by destroying the sense of dramatic time and place on the stage. "He has shown how the stage can express meaning beyond reality--meaning cannot be expressed by realism in scenery, stage properties, and acting."²⁰

Much attention has been given in contemporary theatre to the handling of time and place, which are major preoccupations also with Wilder. For him time and place are not only a matter of dramatic technique, but also an important part of his conception of life. Being free from the limitations of naturalistic staging, Wilder is able to manipulate time and place freely on stage. In The Long Christmas Dinner, the dinner continues without interruption for ninety years, through various generations. It is always Christmas Day, but the family members change. The new generations enter from stage left; the old generations exit through a portal at the right when they die. In this way,

anachronism is avoided. The undetailed and stark setting establishes no limit to the sense of the passing of years. In The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden, the journey lasts all afternoon, but occupies only about twenty minutes in performance. Pullman Car Hiawatha symbolically describes a trip through time and space in the nocturnal movement of a train from New York to Chicago. The ride requires only half an hour on stage. With only a few plain chairs to serve as berths, "we hear the very vital statistics of towns and fields that passengers are traversing; we hear their thoughts; we even hear the planets over their heads."²¹ "It [the train] becomes part of the entire westering turn of the earth, part of the movement of life in space."²² In discussing the technique of staging, Malcolm Goldstein concludes:

Wilder in these three [one-act] plays offered not one scene or a series of separate vignettes, but a flow of time, regulating the passage of the hours for specific effects of character or situation.²³

Wilder's willful manipulation of time and space is best demonstrated in his full-length plays, Our Town and The Skin of Our Teeth. Our Town sets forth in a small town for a period of twelve years, presenting three crucial events of life. Wilder explains: "I have set the village against the largest dimension of time and place."²⁴ Since there is no scenery, the transitions in scene can be shifted as swiftly as the imagination, not only in time and place but back and forth from life to death. As a result, "although the action of the play takes place in a small town in New Hampshire at a specific time and it is concerned with individuals, yet it aims to illustrate a truth that holds for men and women everywhere, in the big city as well as the small town, and in

every time, in 1938 or 1959 as well as in 1901."²⁵ The events occurring in the play are, therefore, not truly events, but rather examples of a universal pattern in human lives. Critic Travis Bogard asserts:

If his story had been developed realistically, carefully plotted, decorated so as to attempt to convince the audience that it was seeing living human beings, much of its truth would have drained from the play, and all of it would have seemed sentimental and unconvincing.²⁶

The Skin of Our Teeth tells the story of mankind in three acts, depicting the perils of the ice age, of the flood, and of the world war. Time and place are elaborately distorted and compressed. In the first act an ice shield grinds down on Excelsior, New Jersey. The second act is laid in Atlantic City just before the Deluge. In the third act the great philosophers are portrayed as hours of the night. "Three thousand years of human thought are reduced to four hours, which pass in less than two minutes on the stage."²⁷ The play literally encompasses pre-historic as well as historic times. As Malcolm Cowley further comments:

This foreshortening of time, which almost becomes an abolition of time, is an opportunity for . . . the dramatist. He is permitted to transfer any character from one historical period of pattern to another, so long as the character reappears on a corresponding square of the checker board.²⁸

In discussing Wilder's manipulation of time on the stage, Robert W. Corrigan says, "By destroying the illusion of time, Wilder achieves the effect of any time, all time, each time."²⁹ It may be added that the same is also true for his manipulation of place.

Comparing the device of staging, the freedom and scope of Wilder's theatre with Chinese theatre, one can easily find many resemblances.

Chinese stage, as has been discussed in Chapter I, is basically barren of decor. Scenery is created through multiple combinations of stage properties, the symbolic use of hand-props, or through the actor's pantomime. Everything is simplified yet intensified. "Owing to the absence of canvas and cardboard settings, and of detailed paraphernalia, . . . the Chinese drama is infinitely flexible."³⁰ "An ordinary play may contain as many as thirty scenes: it is not limited by time and space."³¹ For example, in a popular Chinese play, Yu-t'ang-ch'ün (The Happy Hall of Jade), within the first thirty minutes of performance, the action has already involved more than a dozen different locations, and an entire journey which covers more than five hundred miles. Obviously, the naturalistic way of staging is impractical to a play with such immense scope of time and place; likewise, neither is it practical to Wilder's plays.

Among all features, Wilder's interest in using a couple of chairs to represent an unlimited number of settings is most apparently similar to the table-and-chair combinations in Chinese stage practice. However, the difference lies in that in Chinese theatre the audience has been trained to accept this convention; whereas Wilder has to employ a stage manager to illustrate the locale to the audience. Similarly, the Chinese stage has conventionally been regarded as anywhere and not as a particular place; Wilder's bare stage, however, is a conscious effort to break down the illusion.

With the barest of stage materials, both Wilder's theatre and Chinese theatre must elicit the audience participation in a vision of

reality which is not merely mimetic substitution. The task, of course, befalls the actors. The actor's craft and the quality of acting are the most demanding element in Chinese theatre. The same emphasis is also observed in Wilder's theatre. Donald Haberman has asserted that the Chinese performer Mei Lan-fang's performances in New York in 1930 had some effect on Wilder. He states:

They [the conventions of Chinese theatre] represent the essence of the idea, the action, or the emotion. They are the barest bones of eternal truth raised to a level that all may recognize. At the same time, when any individual actor of some stature interprets the conventions, they become particularized without losing any of their possibilities as enduring modes of behavior. On his bare stage Wilder sought to dramatize this balance between the individual and the man.³²

In Our Town pantomime is mainly used to express the household chores: preparing meals, stringing beans, mowing the grass, delivering the paper and milk. The commonplace event, through pantomime, is revealed as part of a generalized truth. Haberman, in discussing the performance of the play, suggests:

Mei Lan-fang superimposed realistic detail upon his very stylized and rigidly controlled acting. Wilder demands from the actors of his early one-act plays and of Our Town that they attempt something like Mei Lan-fang's expression of a reality above the casual and a permanence beyond the brevity of each performance.³³

The dramatic structure of Wilder's play incorporates with his technique of staging, appearing more episodic than sequential, more college-like than linear. "Implanted in Wilder's early play, Pullman Car Hiawatha, are episodes which may stand alone and yet serve the purpose of communicating a motif."³⁴ Our Town presents a series of small glimpses of life, each without beginning or ending. The

construction of the play is not logically built. The three separate events (or rather situations) consist in three acts; each episode retains its individual significance. Episodic structure is also observed in The Skin of Our Teeth. The play is built up through a montage of three unrelated events, giving each episode its independence.

The episodic structure can be considered as one of the determinants for Wilder's idea of theatricalism. Wixson points out:

An episodic plot has the effect of breaking up the flow of the play and alienating the audience from the action. Rather than the continuous narrative and unbroken illusion of naturalistic drama, what the audience views is a series of varying and broken scenes drawing attention to themselves as theatrical device.³⁵

He further comments:

The repetitiousness of the episodes in Wilder's plays . . . further reinforces his desire to show the importance of recurring commonplace experience and how this experience may illuminate the possibilities of life.³⁶

The central idea of the lesson the playwright intends to convey to the audience is the element for connecting episodes in Wilder's plays, "a succession of events illustrating a general idea," Wilder himself puts it.³⁷ The concept demonstrated in Our Town can be summed up in the idea that the ordinary life can be rich in beauty and happiness if only we were aware of it. In The Skin of Our Teeth, the lesson is that life always offers a new chance and with it a new promise.

As has been pointed out in the discussion about Chinese dramatic structure in the previous chapter, episodic structure prevails in Chinese drama. Chung-wen Shih says of the structure of Yüan drama, "A considerable number are merely episodic, with a plot generally following

a natural chronological order beginning at the beginning and moving along towards the conclusion."³⁸ A Yüan play, Chao-shih ku-erh (The Orphan of Chao), may provide an example. The play is presented episodically through a series of loosely connected scenes. It begins with a feud between two powerful households and the massacre of the Chao family. It then proceeds with the story of the Chao orphan, his growth and adulthood, and the final revenge for his father's death. "Such a long drawn-out presentation of events, beginning with the origins of the situation and proceeding chronologically towards the end, is typical of Yüan plays."³⁹ In most cases, favored units are extracted from plays of great length and performed as self-contained units.

One can recognize that episodic structure is characteristic of both Wilder and Chinese drama. Another similarity is that a Chinese play is usually preceded by a "wedge" (see p. 14), functioning as prologue or interlude; likewise, in Wilder's plays, the character of the Stage Manager serves to introduce the frame of the play, and gives the information to the audience, resembling the Chinese "wedge." The difference between the two dramas, however, probably lies in the linking element. In Chinese drama, everything hangs on the story; whereas in Wilder's plays, abstract ideas serve to hold the whole play together.

Wilder's dramatic structure is inextricably bound with narrative method. The presentation of separate situations requires narration to keep some continuity between events. Also through narrative method the events are arranged so as to unfold the underlying idea. In "Some Thoughts on Playwriting," Wilder points out:

The theatre carries the art of narration to a higher power than the novel or the epic poem. . . . The dramatist must be by instinct a story teller.⁴⁰

He further adds:

Many dramatists have regretted absence of the narrator from the stage, with his point of view, his powers of analyzing the behavior of the characters, his ability to interfere and supply further facts about the past, about simultaneous actions not visible on the stage, and above all his function of pointing the moral and emphasizing the significance of the action.⁴¹

In Wilder's plays, narration is mostly carried out by an omniscient Stage Manager. The character of the Stage Manager first appears in Pullman Car Hiawatha, designated to indicate the scene, to move about a few pieces of furniture. He also serves to introduce the dramatic action and function within it. "He is both the raisonneur, or commentator, and, in speaking the lines of several minor figures, a veritable constellation of characters. The Stage Manager is, so to speak, both a one-man chorus and a multiple 'second character,' or deuteragonist in the play, which reflects conventions of both Greek and Oriental drama in this respect. . . ."⁴² In The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden, the narration is again resorted to a Stage Manager who sets up the visible action and participates in the play in several roles.

The function of the Stage Manager in Our Town is even more complex. At the beginning, he directly names the author, producer, director, actors, and the place and time of the action. At the beginning of the second act, he explains briefly the nature of each act, and cites its title. He also introduces the characters. In this role, he is like a kind of announcer, but his words also reveal to the audience a

knowledge of the future fates of the characters in the play. However, although the Stage Manager has great power to arrange the play-world, he is by no means an outsider to this world; he is himself in this world. During the course of the play, he alternatively takes the part of one of the characters, whenever it seems necessary to him. In the third act, he even functions as deus ex machina who is able to raise the dead for a day.

The use of the Stage Manager enables Wilder to avoid digression, and to explain his view of things. In his critical study of Our Town, Barnard Hewitt suggests:

The Stage Manager is not merely an easy means to exposition, to setting the scene in Grover's Corners. He is the principal means to the double vision, the intermeshing of past and present, [the small town and the universe, the time and the eternity], which permeates the whole play.⁴³

In Our Town, one of the tasks of the Stage Manager is to provide reality outside the narrow scope of the family circle, and to transfer it onto the stage. In The Skin of Our Teeth, the scope is enlarged to all areas; the usual realistic setting of theatrical presentation is nowhere to be seen in this play. To translate it into the language of the theatre, Wilder has employed, in the first place, an announcer to give the frame of the play, and then the character of Sabina to establish the link with "reality." In Act I, the announcer relates the news of the world as shown on lantern slides projected on a screen and declares that "The sun rose this morning at 6:32 a.m."⁴⁴ "This introductory scene relates the Antrobuses to present-day America, to biblical time, and to the Ice Age and prepares for the play within the play that

follows."⁴⁵ The play he introduces is repeatedly interrupted by characters stepping out of their roles and into others as actors. The actress playing Sabina not only steps out of role, but also comments on the play itself. In technical terms, Sabina is roughly the equivalent of the Stage Manager in Our Town. Donald Haberman argues:

Having the characters in the play played by actors who are also characters in the play permits Wilder to speak directly and in somewhat didactic manner to the audience, much as the Stage Manager does in Our Town.⁴⁶

Storytelling-like narration allows Wilder to present a unified idea in a succession of events. Narrative method is indispensable to Wilder's plays. As is pointed out by Haberman:

Wilder found it necessary to place the Stage Manager in control of his imaginary world in order to guide the audience. He does not instruct the audience what to think, but like all well-integrated characters in a play, he guides that audience into understanding what the action presented on the stage represents.⁴⁷

Wilder's narrative method has a lot in common with that of Chinese drama. Having been influenced by storytelling devices, narratives in Chinese drama are widely used to set the dramatic situation, describe scenery, explain events, and express emotions. The first thing a character does when he enters onto the stage is to announce his identity and tell his background. Many asides and explanatory monologues are delivered openly to the audience; "actors often find themselves in the position of narrators or lyrical poet speaking directly to the audience."⁴⁸ The narrative method is sometimes used for recapitulation, providing for the audience an understanding of the story. Wilder's Stage Manager

functions in a fashion that almost encompasses all the characteristics of narrative device in Chinese drama. In certain cases, the Stage Manager is more like a property man in Chinese theatre, when he moves the furniture to arrange a setting for the performance to take place.

Although it is said that the employment of a visible-invisible stage factotum--the Stage Manager--was borrowed from the Oriental theatre,⁴⁹ the difference lies in the practice. The oral narrative device in Chinese drama is a longstanding tradition; in performance, it is mainly demonstrated through characters, especially the clownish character, in the play, rather than through an imposed character of the Stage Manager. In this respect, The Skin of Our Teeth, with a character such as Sabina, is more analogous to Chinese drama than Wilder's other plays.

Characterization is another key to comparing Wilder's plays with Chinese drama. In Wilder's theatre, characterization is intimately related to narration, so that the consistency of a single style is maintained. The unity of narration and characterization in Wilder's practice is to give up psychological characterization in favor of an arbitrary and artificial arrangement of events. In speaking of characterization, Wilder says:

Characterization in a play is like a blank check which the dramatist accords to the actor for him to fill in. . . . The dramatist's principal interest being the movement of the story, he is willing to resign the more detailed aspects of characterization to the actor.⁵⁰

As it is revealed in his plays, Wilder left the characterization so general that the people in his play have to be created in the imagination

of the audience. Characters, therefore, are designed to convey ideas, and they naturally make their appearance as symbols. "The presentation of characters [in Wilder's plays] is deliberately rendered two-dimensional for the purpose of indicating types rather than individuals."⁵¹

In Pullman Car Hiawatha, the characters clearly are types, which consist of a maiden lady, a middle-aged doctor, an engineer, an insane woman, and a young couple. They are even de-individualized by being called according to their positions on the train. These characters are simply designed to fit into a scheme of ideas. In The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden, Wilder offers an image of a humble American family with the religious mother and her blasphemous son. The stage direction even goes as far as to prescribe that the Stage Manager read "from a typescript the lines of all the minor characters . . . with little attempt at characterization."⁵² The Long Christmas Dinner is composed of an upper-middle-class family with the members revealed in relation to one another in highly familiar ways, such as the reminiscing widow and her respectful daughter-in-law, and the spoiled son and his irate father. In these three plays, Malcolm Goldstein points out, "Wilder tries to embody in the characters the popular concepts--'images,' in the current jargon--of persons with certain definite functions to perform in life."⁵³

Characterization in Our Town is absent. Again, characters largely run to types, personal identity is not very strongly individualized. George and Emily are made to represent a young boy and a young girl. The others can be simply labelled as townfolk. As Helmut Papajewski points out:

The adults . . . have one common denominator: Mrs. Webb and Mrs. Gibbs in their almost complete absorption in household cares, and Dr. Gibbs and Mr. Webb, who in their historical hobbies . . . hardly differ from each other in any essential respects.⁵⁴

Travis Bogard also explains:

The human figures are cliché figures. The cliché figures form into a pattern whose sense is of a typical assortment of men and women, no one worthier of attention than any other. Because they are cliché images of men, they hold an anonymity entirely suitable to Wilder's larger design.⁵⁵

The cliché images of men, when put in an elaborate production scheme, are transferred into universal archetypes. The characters in The Skin of Our Teeth are again types, some are even abstractions, and some represent more than one person. "The family name Antrobus is really the Greek word anthropos, human being or man."⁵⁶ As the play is further developed, Mr. Antrobus is identified with Adam, Mrs. Antrobus with Eve, Henry with Cain, and Sabina with the other Eve. These four characters, therefore, represent the four human types. They are organized as a family, whose significance is purely archetypal. Rex Burbank suggests, "The characters are all allegorical figures on three levels: as Americans, as biblical figures, and as universal human types."⁵⁷

Wilder insists that the actors are only pretending to be characters. In his plays, actors are stage-managed; they are, so to speak, in rehearsal. They are deliberately depicted as theatrical stereotypes, without any attempt to convince anyone of the reality of their illusionary comings and goings. Similarly, in Chinese theatre, characters are types. As has been described in the first chapter, characters are classified into four categories, each endowed with a particular

temperament, such as justice, fidelity, chastity, and so forth. They are designed not to depict the traits of individual character, but to reveal a general quality of a certain type of people. In discussing characterization in Yuan drama, Chung-wen Shih states that Yuan drama utilizes a primarily non-naturalistic mode, making characters either symbolic or typical. Even the few more realistically conceived characters do not remain consistently realistic, and many characters are presented with no attempt at individuality.⁵⁸ Comparing Shih's statement with the above description of Wilder's idea of characterization, one may clearly detect the similarities between the two dramas.

In Wilder's theatre, the practice of stagecraft, dramatic structure, the device of narration, and characterization are interrelated to achieve theatricalism. From the viewpoint of the unity of style, all these techniques are justified in operation among one another. This study has presented, within a defined scope, many similarities either in spirit or in practice between Wilder's theatre and Chinese theatre. Certain instances seem to reveal that Wilder has borrowed some of the techniques from Chinese theatre, such as the symbolic use of chairs, for his own use. Similar though they are, it remains difficult to judge to what degree Wilder was influenced by Chinese theatre. One can argue that all techniques Wilder employs have long been in Western theatre tradition, for the bare stage is like the Elizabethan stage; the allegorical characters are characteristic of the medieval morality plays; the narrative method corresponds with the Greek chorus; and the episodic dramatic structure can be found in the Epic Theatre or in expressionist experiments.

Wilder has defined convention as an agreed-upon falsehood, a permitted lie. Its functions are to evoke the collaborative activity of spectator's imagination, and to raise the action from the specific to general.⁵⁹ In his effort to find "new ways" for theatrical presentation, he resorts to the old traditions. Apart from Western traditions, Wilder occasionally alluded to the conventions of Chinese theatre in his writings. He called himself "a rediscoverer of forgotten goods." Among all the traditions in the world, the Chinese theatre is, after all, a piece of well-preserved ancient art, a living example of how the oldest theatres of the world might have been.

NOTES

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CHAPTER III
BERTOLT BRECHT AND CHINESE THEATRE

Constantin Stanislavski, Bertolt Brecht, and Jerzy Grotowski are three dominant figures in Western contemporary theatre. To employ Robert Benedetti's metaphorical description, they are stems and branches which form the architecture of contemporary theatre, determine its shape, and give it strength and resilience.¹ Stanislavski and Grotowski are both theatrical practitioners and theoreticians; while Brecht, apart from being a theoretician and director, is a distinguished playwright. Peter Brook claims that Brecht is "the strongest, most influential and most radical theatre man of our time."² He further says, "No one seriously concerned with the theatre can by-pass Brecht. Brecht is the key figure of our time, and all theatre work today at some point starts or returns to his statement and achievement."³

Probably no one in Western theatre is so complex as Brecht, who constantly exposed himself to various traditions and schools of theatrical practice, and absorbed from them the essence to modify his theatre. As is stated by Martin Esslin:

Brecht has always acknowledged his debt to a wide range of old theatrical conventions and traditions: the Elizabethan, Chinese, Japanese and Indian theatre, the use of chorus in Greek tragedy, the techniques of clowns and fair-ground entertainers, the Austrian and Bavarian folk play, and many others.⁴

Among all the foreign traditions, Brecht's response to Chinese theatre seems most enthusiastic; not only because he adopted a Chinese play

to one of his later masterpieces, The Caucasian Chalk Circle, but also because he found a provocative example of the art of acting in Chinese theatre. Moreover, certain devices used in Brechtian theatre forcefully recall those of Chinese theatre.

Critical and comparative studies concerning the relationship between Brecht and Chinese theatre are innumerable. Among these studies, Renata Berg-Pan's Bertolt Brecht and China⁵ and Antony Tatlow's The Mask of Evil⁶ are the most thorough ones.

A great portion of Berg-Pan's book is devoted to exploring Brecht's contact with Chinese poetry and philosophy, offering much invaluable evidence about Chinese influence on Brecht's thought; only a limited portion deals with theatre. In the part concerning theatre, she has pointed out some links between Brecht's plays and Chinese drama, and some of Brecht's misunderstanding with regard to Chinese acting. Since her emphasis is on textual research, and her approach is restricted to almost a one-sided Chinese view, her study fails to delve into the deep layers of Brecht's works.

Tatlow's study is more insightful and profound. It employs multiple approaches, encompassing a great number of areas, such as the visual art of Chinese theatre, the text of Chinese drama, the social situations, and the substance of Chinese philosophy reflected in Chinese theatre. He organically examines Brecht's responses to all these aspects, and more importantly, holds all the aspects together. His assessment of Chinese influence on Brecht is more objective and relevant, without overlooking the aesthetic kinship between Brecht's art and Chinese theatre.

The present study first deals with the analogies between Brechtian theatre and Chinese theatre in technical and formal aspects. While visible similarities between the two dramas may be easy to discern, the purpose of the study of dramatic techniques is, however, to bring out some more subtle parallels relating to Brecht's fundamental ideas of the function of theatre--theatre for pleasure and for instruction. Second, it is intended to clarify some of the issues regarding Brecht's observations about and responses to the art of Chinese acting.

Among Brecht's dramatic works, The Good Woman of Setzuan (1938-39) and The Caucasian Chalk Circle (1944-45) are chosen for the discussion of dramatic form and theatrical technique. Although theatre historians and critics have pointed out that Brecht's work has undergone many stages of development, they unanimously believe that those works composed in exile (1933-1947) crystallize his dramatic techniques and his theories. The reason for choosing these two plays is that they are not only considered to be Brecht's most mature and successful works; but they also evidently manifest their indebtedness to the Chinese sources, and reveal the strongest affinity with Chinese theatre. As Esslin says, "Each play has its own individual tone . . . The Good Soul of Setzuan a Confucian courtesy; the Caucasian Chalk Circle a different blend of oriental colours."⁷

Brecht began to formulate his theatrical views in the late 1920's. By then, a number of German playwrights and directors had been engaging in various new experiments. Realism was crumbling and new approaches were being put to tests. Brecht belonged to this new generation which had to make a new beginning.⁸ Brecht's theories have been said to be

influenced by his contemporaries. His early works show many traces of expressionistic techniques, such as loose construction, treatment of the characters as types rather than individuals, and highly concentrated poetic language.⁹ Erwin Piscator's political theatre perhaps stimulated and influenced Brecht most. Over the period of 1919 to 1930 Brecht worked with Piscator, whose stage was devoted to the experiments of making use of new techniques, such as film and posters, to overcome the limitation of the "theatre of illusion" and to turn the theatre into a forum for the discussion of current affairs.¹⁰ From 1924 to 1926, Brecht also served as one of the assistants to Max Reinhardt, whose experiment is characterized by the features of acting as role-playing and the use of monster pantomimes.¹¹ Although Brecht's experiments and theories comprise only some of the many among his contemporaries, he was able to synthesize all the new experiments, overshadowing all the other new trends.

Like Piscator, Brecht believes that "the theatre should make the audience face issues, weigh evidence, and transfer what it had decided to problems outside the theatre."¹² In his fully integrated theory, "A Short Organum for the Theatre,"¹³ Brecht proposes his fundamental idea of the function of theatre, suggesting that theatre is basically for entertainment, but its ultimate aim points to social reform. Entertainment, as is defined by Brecht, results through "productivity," different from the conventional idea of empathy leading to catharsis. Much of his theory amounts to a refutation of the Wagnerian outlook. "Brecht begins with the assumption that the kind of hypnotic effect sought by Wagner is fundamentally wrong, since it reduces the

audience to a completely passive role."¹⁴ He envisioned a theatre in which the audience would play a vital and active role. Therefore, he proposed the idea of "alienation" (Verfremdung). The term probably illustrates the most essential idea in the Brechtian theatre, which is "the process of making events or characters strange, of sufficiently distancing the spectator from the play that he can watch it critically."¹⁵ Consequently, all the means he employed in most of his works revolve around this idea.

Regarding technique, Brecht adopted a number of theatrical devices, such as songs, projections, direct address to the audience, visible lighting, and stage machinery to keep the audience aware that the space is a theatre. These devices serve not only to prevent the audience from emotional involvement, but also to arouse the audience's critical faculty. The structure of his plays tends to be episodic, inclining toward narrative form, telling the story by the use of illustrative scenes. Subject matter is taken from historical events presented with emphasis on "pastness." These techniques, again, attempt to destroy illusion, and to remind the spectators that they are merely getting a report of past events. Brecht's special contribution to contemporary theatre is probably that he envisaged a particular role for the actor. He suggested that the actor, instead of "feeling into" a part and impersonating a character, should "show" the behavior of a kind of person in a type of situation, which would induce the distancing effect and make the performance objective.

Brecht's theory evolved slowly, and it constantly changed and developed during his life. He was always watching his own and other experiments, borrowing and rejecting, modifying theory with practice,

changing his idea as each new production was conceived and tested.¹⁶ In addition, he never ceased to return to the past for material which seemed adaptable to his method and suitable for his themes. The key term of his theory, "alienation," did not appear in his writings until 1936; his integrated theory "A Short Organum for the Theatre," was not published until 1948. Even then, he continued to modify his views up to the time of his death.¹⁷ However, when we step back to look at the whole picture of his works, many distinct characteristics seem clearly discernible. These characteristics consist of: the predominant open dramatic structure and freeflowing scenes; candid theatricality in demonstrative acting, and suggestive setting; reintroduction of narration, music, and songs into the "word drama;" the use of rhythmic movements bordering on dance; the invitation--and sometimes provocation--of audience participation; the function of theatre as entertainment and instruction; the employment of exaggerated costume, mask, or face-painting; and the absence of the "fourth wall."¹⁸

If the features of Brechtian theatre are compared with those of Chinese theatre, one can find many similarities. In terms of the nature of performance, both theatres share the idea of the absence of the "fourth wall." Instead of imitating reality, both theatres strive for theatricalism and the economy of expression. Scenery is usually either not present at all or is represented by simplified props or pictures; no attempt is made to present a "realistic" looking locale. In both traditions, exaggerated costumes are widely used; pantomime is often used to supplement or to replace settings. Actors often step out of their roles to deliver their speeches or comments directly to the audience.

Dramatic structure in both dramas tends to be episodic. Narrative devices are used to link the scenes and tie the story together. Time and space are treated freely; parabolic world and real world often become indistinguishable. In both dramas, prologue and epilogue are sometimes used to provide the framework of the play, to set the action in motion, and to sum up the story. Musical elements and verses are intermingled with prose.

While the above similarities seem to cover a wide range of the aspects and characteristics of Brechtian theatre and Chinese theatre, they, however, reflect only the superficial side. One can argue that those traits shared by the two theatres can be directly traced to the Western tradition, either traditional or avant-garde. As one critic states: "Brecht knew very well how little his plays had to do with countries which he used as background."¹⁹ It is true that if the connections between Brecht and Chinese theatre are expected to be induced out of the comparison of the external aspects, they will be proved to be only tenuous. One critic has already concluded that "Brecht uses relatively few Chinese conventions, and when he does use one he usually Westernizes it enough that it comes close to conventions used in the traditional Western theater."²⁰ Another scholar also points out: "Taking Chinese plots as a starting-point, Brecht adapted them, often changing them beyond recognition."²¹

Before dealing with specific issues in Brecht's plays, it is helpful to recount some of Brecht's contact with China. From the 1920's to the times he composed The Good Woman of Setzuan and The Caucasian Chalk Circle, Brecht had witnessed several productions done in the

Chinese manner, or dealing with the social problems in China. He also saw genuine Chinese performances in 1935. In addition, Brecht's concern with things Chinese was particularly intense during this period.²² All these factors seem to have inspired or influenced Brecht's choices for composing the two plays.

In 1925, Max Reinhardt produced The Circle of Chalk, a German translation by Klabund (Alfred Henschke) of the Chinese play.²³ Kenneth D. Weisinger asserts: "Most striking for Brecht must have been the unusual combination of music and speech."²⁴ In 1930, according to John Fuegi, Meyerhold came to Berlin with his ensemble. The two plays presented by the group were Tretiakov's Roar China and Paul Claudel's Cristophe Colombe. The two productions adopted techniques borrowed from the Chinese and Japanese stage; Brecht saw the productions, and was impressed by the new methods of expression.²⁵

In 1931, Piscator produced Friedrich Wolf's Tai Yang Awakes. Brecht saw the play. Clara Yu Cuadrado describes this play as follows:

Piscator added a prologue in which the actors entered on the stage, changed into their costumes and put on their make-up; at the same time they discussed the political situation in China and compared it to the conditions in Germany.²⁶

She further adds that "the rhythmic movements of the weaving-women, the execution, and the march of demonstrators" were all played as symbolic dance.²⁷ The description reminds one of the structure and production manner of The Caucasian Chalk Circle.

In 1935, Brecht visited Moscow and witnessed Okhlopkov's "highly stylized 'Oriental' production of Pogodin's play, Aristocrats," and the

performances of Chinese actor, Mei Lan-fang.²⁸ Feugi asserts: "In that Indian Summer of experimental theatre in Moscow, Brecht was to be profoundly influenced by [these] two theatrical events that he saw there. Both deepened and extended his appreciation of the Oriental stage."²⁹

The above descriptions offer a basic picture of Brecht's contact with and response to Chinese theatre and the situation in China. Besides the art of Chinese theatre, equally important to Brecht was probably the social milieu. Both Roar China and Tai Yang Awakes reveal the events of the Chinese revolution. One of the plays performed by Mei Lan-fang was Ta-yü sha chia (The Fisherman's Revenge). A. C. Scott describes:

The story of the play concerns a poor fisherman who is harrassed and oppressed by a rapacious landlord who orders his tenant to be cruelly beaten for daring to stand up for his rights. The fisherman and his pretty daughter kill the tyrant in revenge. . . . In Russia it was . . . praised for its theme of the triumph of the proletariat over the evil landlord. . . .³⁰

We can imagine that Brecht, being always concerned with social problems and current events, must have been impressed by these plays. Also, these plays probably provided some of the sources for the "Chinese" setting of The Good Woman of Setzuan and the theme of The Caucasian Chalk Circle.

Other Chinese sources contributing to Brecht's two plays consist in poetry and philosophy. "Among Chinese poets, Brecht was especially attracted to the works of Po Chu-i because of Po's didacticism and social criticism, and among the philosophers, it was Mo-tzu to whom Brecht directed his study."³¹

Brecht came to know Po's poems in Arthur Waley's anthology, One Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems in 1939. Shortly thereafter, he

published four of Po's poems for the reason of their social criticism and political comment. One of them, entitled "The Big Rug," was later revised and used in The Good Woman of Setzuan.³² It reads:

A Governor was asked what was needed
 To save the freezing people in the city.
 He replied:
 "A blanket ten thousand feet long
 To cover the city and all its suburbs."³³

Berg-Pan has pointed out that "the largest number of poems translated by Brecht are Po Chü-i."³⁴ Po's poetry has been known for its use of simple language and its quality of enjoyable didacticism. Brecht seems to share with Po a highly responsive social conscience and an attitude toward artistic principles.³⁵

With the same theoretical commitment to social criticism and political analysis, Brecht was fascinated by the works of Mo-tzu.³⁶ Of all Mo-tzu's conceptions the most sublime was universal love. He detested war and argued the brotherhood of all men. He also proposed to alter the fundamental principles of the society. Weisinger believes that Brecht's interest in Mo-ist thought deepened his already established faith in Marxist materialism, and gave him further confirmation in the path he had already chosen.³⁷ The teachings of this Chinese thinker seem to have inspired Brecht for his choices of the themes of his two plays. In The Good Woman of Setzuan the themes concern the deep contradictions in human nature and the moral dilemma of being good in a wicked world, in The Caucasian Chalk Circle things should be given to those who make the best use of them.

Moreover, Berg-Pan also points out that Mrs. Yang's opening speech in scene eight of The Good Woman of Setzuan was originally derived from Mo-tzu's writing.³⁸ Other traces of Mo-tzu occur in Shen Te's lines in the "interlude" between scenes five and six, which read:

To let no one perish, not even oneself
 To fill everyone with happiness, even oneself
 Is so good.³⁹

The influences of Chinese poetry and philosophy on Brecht's choices of subject matter and moral in his two plays are evident. He shares views with the Chinese poets and philosophers, and was edified by their works. For more details, the reader may refer to Berg-Pan's book.

The Good Woman of Setzuan is a parable in Chinese setting, and somewhat in the manner of Chinese theatre. It is significant to note that research shows that the sketches for the play date back to the twenties, and the final version was not completed until 1941.⁴⁰ We have already recognized Brecht's contact with China during this period. One scholar has pointed out that during this long period of time the formulation of the play had evolved through many alterations, which include changes of title, geographical location, names of characters, and theme.⁴¹

Photographs of the productions of the play⁴² reveal that the Chinese setting has heavily influenced the production style. John Fuegi comments:

Easily moved screens are used to create the barest and most stylized of settings. In this an attempt has been made not only to match

the play's theme stylistically but also to give some sense of the play's architecture, based, as it is, on Chinese models of dramaturgy.⁴³

From other photographs,⁴⁴ we can see that most of the characters wear typical Chinese uniform. Their costume usually consists of black trousers and a long jacket or shirt of different colors. Some of the characters wear Chinese-style hats made of bamboo leaves. Tatlow mentions that in Strehler's 1958 Milan production, the three gods were turned into Peking Opera figures with glittering costumes, masks and beards.⁴⁵ All these efforts, however, have little to do with the relative conventions of Chinese theatre; they can only be considered as an endeavor to keep the unity of the production manner. As Fuegi comments: "The play itself is a German work disguised as a Chinese costume piece."⁴⁶ "China is here a means of achieving some aesthetic, economic, and political distance from the events described or presented."⁴⁷

When discussing the "alienation" effect in epic theatre, critics tend to consider Brecht's alternating use of verses and musical elements with prose as means to interrupt the audience's identification with the performance, and thus achieve this effect. In Brecht's theatre "the non-verbal arts play an essential and considered part."⁴⁸ Eric Bentley says that "the methods of Brecht's theatre--its use of interruption and 'alienation,' for example--do constitute a kind of irritation."⁴⁹ However, he argues:

Yet if this is all we say, the conclusion drawn by many will be that, in order to annoy everyone, Brecht destroys his plays by deliberate incongruities and impertinent interpolations. In a play like Mother Courage, Puntila, or Chalk Circle the idea is not to annoy but to

awaken, and this, not by flying in the face of dramatic art, but by the re-creation, the enrichment, of dramatic art.⁵⁰

Bentley seems to say that the pitfalls for dealing with this issue lie in the critics' preoccupation with the theory of "alienation." Therefore, they fail to judge Brecht's methods in relation to the context of dramatic situation.

From the viewpoint of dramatic structure, Brecht's use of verses and songs intermingled with prose is strikingly similar to that of Chinese theatre. However, if the comparison is made merely on these aspects, the result will be like the comparison of the episodic structure of Brecht's plays with that of Chinese drama. After pointing out this analogy, there is actually nothing more to say. The following discussion attempts to examine how musical and poetic elements function in both Brecht's plays and Chinese drama.

The Good Woman of Setzuan contains seven songs. Feugi suggests that these songs are specifically related to the plane of dramatic action and are not set in the play like plums in a cake.⁵¹ Alfred D. White also states, "The songs are similarly parabolic [to the play itself] and contribute to the statement of the play's theme."⁵² It is clear that the songs in the play cannot be simply considered as means for retarding the dramatic tension. A further statement reveals Brecht's intention for using the songs:

That Brecht knew exactly what he was up to with the use of songs in this particular play we know from a diary note in January 1941: "Inasmuch as the play is very long, I shall add a poetic element, some verses and songs. It may become thereby lighter and not so boring even if it cannot be made shorter."⁵³

When we recall that one of Brecht's fundamental ideas of theatre was theatre for pleasure, we can assume that in this case Brecht's concern was not so much about the "alienation" effect as the entertaining quality.

Yet the songs are by no means simply for entertainment. As Fuegi suggests:

Each [song] summarizes a critical development in the dramatic fable at the same time that it elevates the text beyond the specific and the mundane and places it at the level of the general and the rhythmically recurrent.⁵⁴

For example, the "Song of the Smoke" is introduced as entertainment and has a more complex relationship to action and theme of the play. It inculcates resignation or inactivity, and just after it Shen Te seems about to despair. For most of the figures of the play, despair and inactivity alternate; they sometimes feel like giving up, such as Yang Sun after the sixth scene, then they return to engage in shaping their own life again.⁵⁵

Another instance occurs in The Caucasian Chalk Circle. A report about the production of the play reveals that songs are used to strengthen and heighten the tension of action. It reads:

Often the songs are interpreted as V-effects. They interrupt the dialogue; it follows therefore, so the conclusion is drawn, that they also interrupt the action. However, Brecht wanted, for instance in the scene where Grusha again meets her finance, the actors to mime, with the most polished expression, the text of the singers. Distrust, reproach, disappointment, should be mirrored in their faces. The song has the poetic expression of silence. At the same point [in the play], the singers, as they give expression to the reproachful thoughts of Simon Chachawa, should not sing, as at other times, as though they were telling a tale and were not part of the action, but rather angrily, accusingly.⁵⁶

The report concludes, "This moment cannot be classified under any stylistic principle, it is simply a poetic, beautiful, and self-contained aesthetic moment."⁵⁷

In other places, musical elements function as a linking force. About the production of the second act, "Flight into the Northern Mountains," of The Caucasian Chalk Circle, Fuegi writes:

Brecht himself notes of the music: "For the second act, . . . the theatre needs a driving kind of music that will hold this very epic act together." Not only did this driving music hold the act together, it also tended to reinforce the tension generated by the flight itself.⁵⁸

It seems clear that every piece of song or music which Brecht has chosen has its specific function, which does not serve as the interruption of the flow of the play, but rather in most cases as a propelling force or aesthetic demand.

In The Good Woman of Setzuan, about twenty verses are interpolated in the prosaic speeches, and half of them are delivered directly to the audience. Direct address to the audience with the actor stepping out of his role is undoubtedly a means for achieving the "alienation" effect. But the shifting from common speeches to verses does not necessarily prevent the audience from emotional involvement. Like the employment of the songs, the use of verses is to transcend the bounds of prose and, at the same time, to achieve the aesthetic effect. Most of the verses in this play appear in the places where the character's inner conflict is most intense, or the situation concerns a dilemma. Brecht needs verses in these places, because he is trying to say more, to express more meaning.

For example, in the court scene, Shen Te tries to explain why the "good woman of Setzuan," has turned herself into the "evil" Shui Ta. "Brecht's text passes from the prose of evil to the haunting melody of her longing for good."⁵⁹ Shen Te, in a long verse passage, cries:

Why?
Why are bad deeds rewarded?
Good ones punished?⁶⁰

Fuegi comments of its effect on the audience:

Brecht the poet can only begin to hint at the depth of the agony of her question through the intense concentration and rhythmic sweep of verse. Are we, we wonder, supposed to remain rational and maintain our distance in the face of her cry?⁶¹

In The Caucasian Chalk Circle, near the end of the third act, "In the Northern Mountains," Brecht again demonstrates a similar method. As the child is led away and Grusha makes her swift decision to follow and leave her beloved standing agape, the text passes from prose to verse. The singer asks:

Who will decide the case?
To whom will the child be assigned?
Who will the judge be? A good judge? A bad?⁶²

As we can see, this moment is the crux of the situation, and Brecht closes the scene at this heightened moment with verse.

Musical elements and verses in Brecht's plays are integrated parts of the composition, serving to reinforce the power and beauty of the pieces rather than as distractions. Similarly, in Chinese theatre musical elements and poetic language are used to intensify the story and to express intense emotion. In traditional Chinese drama, poetry is

the essential material from which the fabric of dramatic literature is woven. Chung-wen Shih has commented:

On the Yüan stage verse must have been the chief medium through which the audience passed from the crowded pit into the splendors of the Han palace or the atmosphere of a moonlight garden in spring.⁶³

In his discussion of the language in Yüan playwriting, Shih further comments: "Through their lyrics, they were able to explore the depths of mood and feeling of the characters and the significance of the variety of themes."⁶⁴

As has been mentioned in Chapter I, more than half of a Chinese traditional play is sung in verse. Song, speech, and movement are inseparable; they are units which combine to form the main pattern of expression. Singing is primarily for aesthetic pleasure. Closely tied with song is music. "Music played a major role in Yüan drama. It complemented the lyrics, carried the action forward, and contributed to the structure of the plays."⁶⁵ After the dramatic function of music in Yüan drama, Shih concludes:

[Music] is not simply to mark or signify the presence of a critical or climatic situation in the plot. The fact that musical modes are almost always noted before the title of the first song in each act indicates that music was not merely inserted at specific intervals in the action of the plays. It is likely that music in Yüan drama not only contributed to the structure of the play, but also, as in K'ün-chü and Peking opera today, served as an accompaniment for lyrical speeches, as a background for stylized movement, and as a creator of atmosphere.⁶⁶

Comparing Brecht's use of songs and verses with the musical elements and poetry in Chinese theatre, a number of similarities in their function seem evident--figurative expression of compact emotions,

aesthetic concern, and rhythmic effect. The difference is that in traditional Chinese drama the primary focus is on stylistic excellence in poetry and music, while plot structure seems to have been a secondary consideration. In Brecht's plays, plot structure is the essential, while the method of mingling songs and verses with speeches is only one of the structural strategies.

We recognized that Brecht saw Reinhardt's production of Klabund's The Circle of Chalk⁶⁷ in 1925, and he was impressed. With Klabund's play, the present study moves to the discussion of the thematic issue in relation to Brecht's The Caucasian Chalk Circle and the Chinese Hui Lan Chi (The Chalk Circle).

The original Chinese play Hui Lan Chi was written by the Yuan dramatist Li Hsing-tao (thirteenth century). For the convenience of further discussion, the play is summarized as follows:

Chang Hai-tang has been forced by her mother to earn her living and support her family through prostitution. Her brother, Chang-lin, is furious at the dishonor thus done to the family. Hai-tang has hooked a rich landowner, Mr. Ma, and finally marries him as his second wife. Hai-tang bears him a son, and Mr. Ma, greatly pleased about this, begins to love her more than his legal wife who is barren.

The play jumps to the child's fifth birthday. Ma's legal wife has a lover, Chao, the clerk of the court. She wishes to poison her husband in order to be free and live with Chao. She succeeds in carrying out the plot, and accuses Hai-tang of murder and claims the child as her own. She bribes the witnesses in court and the corrupt local judge Su-chun. With grievance, Hai-tang is sentenced, and is packed off to a higher court for confirmation of her sentence and execution.

Mrs. Ma's lover, Chao, who manipulates the judge, has bribed the two policemen escorting Hai-tang and hopes that they will dispose of her. When they do not return, Chao and Mrs. Ma follow to see what has happened. They all meet at an inn. Hai-tang's brother,

now an official of the court of the capital, also appears at the inn. He ensures Hai-tang's safety on her way to the higher court.

Hai-tang is brought before the Governor of the capital, Pao Cheng, whose duty is to supervise the lower courts. By means of the chalk circle stratagem, Pao determines the truth. Justice is done; the child is given back to Hai-tang, and Mrs. Ma is punished.

The play was first translated into French by Stanislas Julien, and was published in 1832. In 1925, Klabund translated the play into German in accordance with Julien's version. In the same year the play was produced by Reinhardt, with whom Brecht was working closely at the time. Klabund's translation retained certain conventional features of the original Chinese play, such as the mingling of lyrical verse with prose and dramatic dialogue, and the technique of narrative exposition. However, he made some substantial alterations to the plot and characters.

Klabund provided Hai-tang a lover named Pao who is a Prince at first, but becomes the Emperor at the end. Pao also turns out to be the judge who conducts the final trial, and marries Hai-tang. Therefore, the ending of the play becomes a melodramatic operetta. Hai-tang's brother, a somewhat dissolute young man in the original text, was made to be a revolutionary figure who openly denounces the corruption and injustice of the Emperor and judges in the court. In the original, Hai-tang's father had died when she was a little girl. Klabund, however, made Mr. Ma to be a ruthless tax-collector who directly caused the death of Hai-tang's father. The "chalk circle" only appears once in the original; in Klabund's translation it becomes an overused symbol.

In the "Introduction" to the English version of Klabund's translation, James Laver mentions:

Klabund was compelled, for Western taste, to make two important modifications in the original play: he had to tone down its ruthlessness, and he had to provide what is called "love-interest." . . . The West has substituted Humanitarianism for Morality.⁶⁹

Laver's remark dramatically coincides with Tatlow's comment. Tatlow writes, "Because of the consistent sentimentalization of the characters [in Klabund's translation], the concrete social criticism of the original has disappeared."⁷⁰

Nevertheless, Brecht's contact with Klabund's translation seems to have influenced certain elements in the construction of his The Caucasian Chalk Circle. Moreover, these elements are related to the original. The most obvious is the device of the chalk circle, which is adopted in Brecht's play to demonstrate how justice is done. The intermingling of song, verse, and prose characteristic of Chinese drama is seen in Brecht's play. The predominant device of using the Singer as a story teller to describe much of the action as it occurs, is analogous to the narrative nature of Chinese drama. Placing the musicians on the stage in full view of the audience corresponds to the onstage orchestra in Chinese theatre.

In terms of performance, critics have also observed certain similarities between Brecht's play and Chinese theatre. Alfred D. White mentions that in one production, "the backdrops are of silky white, painted in Chinese style and having the primary function of being beautiful and giving pleasure in their own right."⁷¹ Particularly interesting, perhaps, is the immense role mime and pantomime play in Brecht's play. In many cases, as White has pointed out, "while the Singer holds the stage aurally, Grusha (and at the end of act 5 Simon) mimes the

emotions concerned."⁷² Leonard C. Pronko also mentions a particular scene. He points out:

A scene that most clearly suggests a famous Chinese device takes place when Grusha, fleeing into the mountains, crosses over a deep chasm on a swaying rotten bridge. One of the standard Chinese operas, invariably performed by troupes abroad, is The Autumn River. . . . The movement of the boatman and the young girl crossing the river is suggested simply by the movements of the actors as they sway with the drifting boat. In the hands of a skillful actress, Grusha's crossing the bridge can become such a piece of visual poetry.⁷³

The similarities of associations mentioned above seem striking at the first glance, but it should be remembered that those instances are chosen sporadically. The whole structure and tone of Brecht's play are quite different from both the original and Klabund's translation. As Fuegi says:

Actually Brecht's play has but little in common either with the Chinese play itself, or with his friend Klabund's German version of the original Chinese work, or with the more stylized conventions of the Chinese stage.⁷⁴

He continues to analyze:

Brecht has switched the locale of the play from China to the cross-road of the East and West, pre-Soviet Georgia. With the change of locale, he throws out the largely decorous language of both his models, flatly rejects the sentimental tale of the former prostitute who ends up as empress, and switches the ending of the play so that the bitchy, rich biological mother of the child loses him in the circle test to the impoverished girl who loved and cared for him after his "real" mother had selfishly abandoned him. Besides throwing out most of the content of his models, Brecht introduces the long, lovely, and involved tale of the cowardly and inebriated, clever and sober judge, Azdak. With all these changes, it is clear that Brecht's play has, in terms of content, virtually only the chalk circle test itself in common with its Chinese and German models.⁷⁵

Fuegi's observation and analysis are indisputable. However, if Brecht's play is compared with the original Hui Lan Chi in another light, we will find some more powerful parallels between the two plays. These parallels probably occurred by coincidence, and if so, they become more interesting, for they reveal certain values held by dramatists in vastly different times and societies. We know that Brecht, composing his play with reference to Klabund's translation, seemed deliberately to throw away the sentimental elements in Klabund's version. In so doing, he focused on the theme of social justice, which is also Li Hsing-tao's central concern. The question, now, is in what context and quality this social justice in Brecht's play parallels that of Li Hsing-tao's.

It must be recognized that Yüan drama was developed under the Mongol rule in the thirteenth century. At the time the traditional civil service examination system, which was based on the teachings of the ancient philosophers, was suspended. Men of letters were deprived of the traditional privilege of holding public office and consequently forced to practice writing plays to earn their living. "Corruption under Mongol rule was rampant, and the alien conquerors were often negligent in dealing out justice to the Chinese people."⁷⁶ The cases of corruption among officials, involving bribes and erroneous sentences, were numerous.⁷⁷ Under this oppressive social situation, many dramatists wrote plays dealing with "the enemies of orderly society: the oppressors within, such as the tyrant noble or bullying bureaucrat, and on its outer fringes, the robbers and brigands."⁷⁸ Social justice became one of the dominant themes in Yüan drama. According to Chung-wen Shih, courtroom stories, relating the solution of a difficult case through the intervention of a

wise and just judge was especially popular. These stories reflect the people's basic trust in divine and social justice to punish the villain in the end.⁷⁹

Hui Lan Chi belongs to a group of eleven extant Yüan plays in which the wise and just judge Pao Cheng is involved. The play, by focusing on a single domestic incident, exposes corruption in the society as a whole.⁸⁰ Li Hsing-tao set the plot in the previous dynasty; it was obviously prudent to do so. By choosing the popular historical figure, Pao Cheng, Li Hsing-tao avoided immediate protest against the contemporary social situation, and gained greater freedom to embody the frustrated expectations of the audience.

Another group of Yüan plays dealing with the theme of justice are the outlaw plays. The notable sources of these plays derive from the novel Shui hu chuan (The Water Margin or All Men are Brothers). The novel contains the stories of 108 chivalrous outlaws. They are known for their "administering a very basic sort of justice, robbing the rich to feed the poor, confounding the wicked, and easing the lot of the oppressed common man."⁸¹ The motto for their conduct is to establish justice in the name of Heaven. In Yüan drama, these heroes became the indirect agents of justice, righting the wrongs imposed by an unfair system and corrupt men.⁸² Since they are outside the law, they "make their own laws, belong to a society of their own, and talk on equal terms with anyone they may encounter."⁸³

In his discussion of Brecht's plays and Chinese drama, Pronko rightly remarks: "The connoisseur in Chinese opera is most often oblivious to such moral content [as that in Hui Lan Chi], . . . his

interest is concerned not on the lesson the play might teach him, but on the technique of the actors."⁸⁴ However, it should not be forgotten that in Yuan period, the problems of human society and the attempt to cultivate certain moral values are strongly emphasized by the dramatists. Tatlow believes: "They [the Yuan dramatists] were once progressive, urging the alien usurpators to uphold the principles of social justice and the judges to defend the rights of the common people."⁸⁵

Brecht's play reverses certain elements in Klabund's translation, and original Chinese play as well. Grusha did not bear the child, but she is the adoptive mother. Brecht also introduced a love scene between Grusha and Simon, which makes the child become "a child of love" at the end of the play. (The just and wise judge Pao Cheng was replaced by a corrupt and quirky yet wise Azdak whose judgments turn the normal methods of justice upside down.) In addition, Brecht added a prologue which seemingly has nothing to do with the main body of the play. Moreover, the "Grusha story" and the "judge story" were torn apart by the playwright, and demonstrated separately. With these changes, Brecht's play apparently deviates from and goes beyond both models in many respects. However, as mentioned before, the theme of the play becomes closer to that of the original.

Brecht completed the final form of the play in 1945. At the time, as Berg-Pan points out, "the end of World War II was in sight, and it is possible that the happy ending to the play, especially the scenes involving Azdak the judge, was inspired by the golden promise of peace in the world."⁸⁶ Or, as Fuegi dramatically writes:

Brecht dreams a beautiful dream. The dream is of a time when war is over, when the prisoners and exiles can return in peace to their own countries, when love and understanding can, however fleetingly, replace brutality, hate and stupidity. In this dream Brecht allows himself, for a brief moment, in the never-neverland of a Caucasus that is largely a product of his own imagination, to think of a short but golden age where justice almost reigned.

Judging from the above two comments, one can imagine that the situation in which Brecht found himself was like that of the Chinese in the Yüan period. The chaotic and irrational circumstances urged both Brecht and Yüan dramatists to write a thinly veiled criticism in which a lesson was taught.

The "Prologue" of Brecht's play is set in a time, immediately after the Second World War, in advance of the actual time of its composition. The main body of the play, consisting of two separate stories, is based on a changed version of an old Chinese play. The two stories converge in the chalk circle test. The convergence mirrors the idea of the "Prologue," and thus the theme of the play is unfolded. Brecht's didactic intention is very clear but, like the Yüan dramatists, he treats it obliquely. The remoteness in time allows him to make a parabolic work to suggest solutions for social inadequacies and frustrations.

Justice in both Brecht's and Li's plays is done in a particular way. The outcome of both trial scenes occurs similarly by chance. Azdak did not judge the case according to law, but based his judgment on a particular sort of wisdom. As is pointed out by theatre scholars: "Without the corruption and impulsiveness of Azdak there would have been no justice for Grusha, since by law the child belongs to the Governor's wife and Grusha to the peasant."⁸⁸

At first glance, Azdak certainly looks like the contrary image of the austere and honest Pao Cheng. However, Tatlow suggests that Pao Cheng in other Yüan plays is often forced to adopt stratagems and to bend the law, when justice becomes the equivalent of class justice.⁸⁹ In some cases, in order to find out the truth Pao was even forced to disguise himself. It should be realized that Azdak judged Grusha's case under the shadow of the gallows, and his behavior was conditioned by the immediate situation. His uncanny behavior is an expedient which enables him to function in an unjust society. The justice brought about by Azdak reminds us of justice done by the outlaws of Yüan drama, which is established in the name of Heaven.

Although Brecht's treatment of the theme is more "parabolic" than Li's, the concept of justice and the means of its implementation are analogous to Li's play and with other Yüan plays dealing with the same theme. Both Brecht and Yüan dramatists share the same concern about social problems. Their plays demonstrate the search for justice; in Brecht's play, Azdak brings about "a brief golden age." In Yüan plays, the incorruptible judge and the defiant outlaws embody the hopes of a harrassed and disillusioned people. The last analogy perhaps lies in "the political efficacy of art"⁹⁰ shared by the dramatists in different times and societies, which reminds one of Brecht's idea of theatre as an instrument of social reform.

Brecht's closest contact with authentic Chinese theatre was probably his encounter with the famous Chinese actor Mei Lan-fang in Moscow in 1935. He was deeply impressed by Mei's performances and the art of Chinese acting. The experience provided him a confirmation of

his theories and a concrete example for his theatre, and led him to write an essay, "Alienation Effect in Chinese Acting."⁹¹ This essay appeared in London in 1936 and "a pencilled note on the typescript says: 'This essay arose out of a performance by Mei Lan-fang's company in Moscow in spring 1935.'"⁹² Significantly, Brecht's arresting term "alienation" first appeared in this essay.

The idea of "alienation" has been applied to almost all aspects of Brecht's theatre. The previous discussion of the present chapter has, at some points, touched upon this idea; the following, however, places focus on the subject of acting to which Brecht's essay refers. It is intended to clarify some points in Brecht's response to Mei's performances, and at the same time attempts to demonstrate some equivalents in spirit between Brecht's theory and Chinese acting.

Reflecting on Mei's performances, Brecht believed: "Traditional Chinese theatre . . . knows the alienation effect, and applies it most subtly."⁹³ He elaborates that the "alienation" effect is first of all achieved by the actor's expressing "his awareness of being watched," and that "the actors choose those positions which will best show them off to the audience, just as if they were acrobats."⁹⁴ Brecht's observation is keen. As has been mentioned in the first chapter, the Chinese performer does stop at certain particular moments in the performance to invite the audience's attention to judge his art by displaying his best skills.

Brecht continues to point out that the Chinese actor "observes," his own acting, and "in this way the artist separates mime and gesture but without distracting from the latter."⁹⁵ He thus concludes, "The

performer's self-observation, and artful and artistic act of self-alienation stopped the spectator from losing himself in the character completely."⁹⁶ In one respect, Brecht is right. The Chinese actor does observe his own art. The actor's sight usually follows his gesture and wherever his concentration is focused. In another respect, Brecht misunderstood that there is a kind of self-alienation in the actor's act. We know that Chinese acting is governed by a set of rigid rules. The ordinary way of expressing human sentiments is thought to be not vivid enough for dramatic presentation. What Brecht saw is the externalization. Therefore, he was struck by the tension between the externalized meticulous fixation of gesture and the intense inner state of sentiments. "Self-alienation" actually does not exist in Chinese acting. Moreover, if we look at Chinese acting from a Chinese point of view, the actor's performance does not keep the spectators detached from the dramatic situation, because the Chinese spectators are mostly familiar with the conventions of Chinese acting.

With the above two points, Brecht continues to describe that the Chinese performer "rejects complete conversion,"⁹⁷ and "is in no trance."⁹⁸ Again, this is what Brecht saw in Mei's performance. In fact, Chinese acting is not as Brecht seems to think; the actor's desire to portray the psychological condition of the character portrayed does exist. In his memoirs, Mei Lan-fang quotes a couplet to describe the art of theatre and the degree of perfection required in acting, which reads:

Those watching you should not see your original self,
 Nor should you think in terms of that self while on stage.
 Look the part of whatever role you play,
 Whoever plays a character must be that character.⁹⁹

The idea contained in this couplet seems totally opposite to what Brecht assumed, and completely corresponds to Stanislavski's methods. However, one should not forget that the actor adopting Stanislavski's methods works from the internal identification to the external expression; while the Chinese actor is required first to master external attributes, and then he begins to avail himself to the nuances of the internal aspects of a character.

Although Brecht seemed to misunderstand the actor's work in Chinese theatre, he did not fail to appreciate the quality of Chinese acting, and he found it corresponding to his own idea. In another place in the same essay, he states:

The Chinese artist's performance often strikes the Western actor as cold. That does not mean that the Chinese theatre rejects all representation of feelings. The performer portrays incidents of utmost passion, but without his delivery becoming heated.¹⁰⁰

The economy, precision, and restraint of Chinese acting provides a good example for Brecht, for "what [he] did renounce was the sort of 'easy' sentimentality."¹⁰¹

However, when turning to the reasoning, Brecht again misinterpreted the point. He suggests: "The coldness [of Chinese acting] comes from the actor's holding himself remote from the character portrayed, along the lines described."¹⁰² In another place, he states: "The alienation effect intervenes, not in the form of absence of emotion, but in the form of emotions which need not correspond to those of the character

portrayed."¹⁰³ Comparing these two statements with the above couplet quoted by Mei, one can detect that the technique of separation between actor and role actually does not exist in Chinese acting. On the contrary, the highly stylized techniques in Chinese acting "de-psychologize the art of acting, and become a substitute for psychology and objectify inner states of mind."¹⁰⁴

Brecht's misunderstandings about the techniques of Chinese acting understandably reveal that he did not see Mei's performances with Chinese eyes. This does not deny, however, the significance of his encounter with this unique art; for what is important to Brecht is not the techniques themselves, but the aesthetic quality of these techniques. We know that Brecht did not learn the idea of "alienation" from Mei's performances. Moreover, although he was impressed by the skills and techniques of Chinese acting, he was fully aware that techniques cannot be transported literally.

Besides the quality of "coldness" mentioned above, Brecht was most fascinated by the sequence of the detailed gestures demonstrated by Mei. In the essay he describes a particular example about a fisherman's wife shown paddling a boat in Mei's performance. The scene consists of clearly defined movements and has "a touch of the amazing."¹⁰⁵ Brecht comments: "Everyday things are thereby raised above the level of the obvious and automatic."¹⁰⁶ Later, in the same essay, he gives an example, and asks himself how the example should be performed on the stage. The example is: "A girl leaves home in order to take a job in a fair-sized city."¹⁰⁷ He raises eight questions concerning this farewell scene, and then he says: "These are the questions that the actors

must answer if they want to show the incident as a unique, historical one."¹⁰⁸ He seems to suggest that a sequence of specifically defined gestures should be found to demonstrate the scene. He, therefore, refers to Chinese acting: "In point of fact the only people who can profitably study a piece of technique like Chinese acting's A-effect are those who need such a technique for quite definite social purposes."¹⁰⁹

Tatlow suggests, "[Brecht] was looking for a method combining the general and the particular. The skill and grace of Mei Lan-fang's art suggested a solution: the articulation of individuality within the structure of a traditional form."¹¹⁰ "In Mei Lan-fang's acting Brecht saw an externalization of the typical and an evaluation of the particular."¹¹¹ Mei's acting provides for Brecht an example which discloses the possibilities for the presentation of alienating patterns of behavior. In another essay, "Short Description of a New Technique of Acting Which Produces an Alienation Effect," written in 1940, Brecht again mentions, "Gesture can at once be said that everything to do with the emotions has to be externalized; that is to say, it must be developed into a gesture."¹¹²

Brecht's constant concern with the gestures of acting is obviously connected with his idea of Gestus, one of the key terms in his theories. Esslin explains this idea as follows:

The basic attitudes of human beings are expressed by what Brecht called Gestus, a term that means not merely "gesture" but covers the whole range of the outward signs of social relationship.¹¹³

He continues to say:

By his [Brecht's] emphasis on Gestus--the clear and stylized expression of the social behavior of human beings towards each other--Brecht shifts the emphasis from the inner life of the characters towards the way in which they "behave" towards each other.¹¹⁴

One of Brecht's assistant directors at the Berliner Ensemble, Carl Weber comments on Brecht's rehearsal, "The most meticulous attention was paid to the smallest gesture. Sometimes it took an hour to work out whether an actor should pick up a tool one way or another."¹¹⁵ This occurred in 1952, seventeen years after Brecht saw Mei's performance. We can imagine that during those long years the techniques of Chinese acting occupied the mind of Brecht considerably.

However, this by no means suggests that Brecht has copied Chinese acting. "Brecht's production had not the slightest visual resemblance to the Chinese theatre."¹¹⁶ He shares with Chinese acting an attitude toward the art and concern with a certain aesthetic quality. The quality of Mei's acting was noted by critics in 1930 when Mei appeared on Broadway. They describe:

He is the most graceful man on New York stage since Nijinsky, his skill, tempo and agility are incomparable.¹¹⁷

He is a strangely alluring figure, supple, fluid immeasurably varied. His hands are used in a fashion altogether marvellous.¹¹⁸

In Brecht's 1936's essay, we can find a passage emphasizing the same quality observed by the above critics. It says:

The alienation effect does not in any way demand an unnatural way of acting. It has nothing whatever to do with ordinary alienation. On the contrary, the achievement of an A-effect absolutely depends on lightness and naturalness of performance.¹¹⁹

The same notion is carried by the 1940's essay, which states, "Special elegance, power and grace of gesture bring about the A-effect."¹²⁰ "We recognize that Brecht developed [a style at the Berliner Ensemble]: a cool, controlled and poetic style, reflecting qualities he so admired in Chinese acting."¹²¹

Brecht's responses to China and the Chinese influence reflected in his theatre are many-faceted. He assimilated all the materials he received, and moulded them into his plays and theories. It seems legitimate to say that the Chinese influence on him was a long and lasting one. This influence, however, is not reflected at the superficial level, but rather at the conceptual level. From the above discussion, we have seen that the kinship between Brecht and China and Chinese theatre lies in the spirit.

However, from the point of view of theatre, his attitude toward this foreign tradition was an observer's one. He did not really study the art of Chinese theatre, but saw it with the perspectives based upon his already established ideas. China provided him a "Chinese setting" for his The Good Woman of Setzuan; the Chinese play, Hui Lan Chi offered him a model which was transposed into his The Caucasian Chalk Circle; Mei Lan-fang's performance gave him an example of the style of acting, which impinged upon his own concept. Some of the elements of Chinese influence were transposed, the others were transformed. Toward the later years of his life, Brecht gradually left his epic theory behind and moved toward a poetic and highly aesthetic style of theatre that reflects the result of combining theatre East and West.

NOTES

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³ Ibid., pp. 71-72.

⁴ Mertin Esslin, Brecht: The Man and His Work (New York: Anchor Books, 1961), p. 121.

⁵ Renata Berg-Pan, Bertolt Brecht and China (Bonn: Bouvier, 1979).

⁶ Antony Tatlow, The Mask of Evil (Bern: Verlag Peter Lang, 1977).

⁷ Quoted by Tatlow, p. 291.

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¹⁰ Ibid., p. 123.

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¹² Oscar G. Brockett, Perspectives on Contemporary Theatre (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971), p. 65.

¹³ Bertolt Brecht, Brecht on Theatre, trans and ed. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), pp. 179-205.

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¹⁵ Oscar G. Brockett and Robert R. Findlay, Century of Innovation: A History of European and American Theatre and Drama Since 1870 (New York: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1973), p. 419.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 418.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 418.

¹⁸ Clara Yu Cuadrado, "Cross-cultural Currents in the Theatre: China and the West," in China and the West: Comparative Studies, ed. William Tay, Ying-hsiung Chou, and Heh-hsiang Yuan (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1980), p. 228.

¹⁹ Quoted by Tatlow, p. 3.

²⁰ John Fuegi, The Essential Brecht (Los Angeles: Hennessey and Ingalls, Inc., 1972), p. 127.

²¹ Tatlow, p. 256.

²² Berg-Pan, p. 186.

²³ Kenneth D. Weisinger, "Brecht and Chinese Theater," Tamkang Review, Vol. 6, No. 2 and Vol. 7, No. 1 (Oct. 1975-April 1976), p. 307.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 308.

²⁵ Fuegi, p. 122.

²⁶ Clara Yu Cuadrado, "Chinese and Western Theatre: Contrasts, Cross-currents, and Convergences," Diss. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1978, p. 93.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 93.

²⁸ Fuegi, p. 125.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 125.

³⁰ A. C. Scott, Mei Lan-fang: Leader of the Pear Garden (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1959), p. 118.

³¹ Weisinger, p. 303.

32 Ibid., pp. 304-305.

33 Bertolt Brecht, The Good Woman of Setzuan in Parables for the Theatre: Two Plays by Bertolt Brecht, ed. Eric Bentley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1965), p. 31.

34 Berg-Pan, p. 224.

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CHAPTER IV
JERZY GROTOWSKI AND CHINESE THEATRE

The search by modern Western theatre for new theatre and drama different from the "theatre of illusion" established in the nineteenth century has been going on for a long while. The innovations and new explorations have evolved in many different directions. As has been discussed in the previous two chapters, Thornton Wilder and Bertolt Brecht exemplify these developments which took place on both sides of the Atlantic.

Wilder's effort was devoted to striving for theatricalism, demonstrated by his choice of dramatic structure and theatrical devices which directly challenged the "theatre of illusion." Brecht, on the other hand, has sought an intellectual theatre through the practice of his "epic" theories. Their works, more or less inspired and influenced by the classical Chinese theatre, have revealed certain aspects in which the characteristics of Eastern and Western theatres have gradually come together. Although their innovations were radical in many respects, they after all failed to go beyond the architectural confinement of the traditional proscenium arch theatre. Their drama was a direct response to contemporary theatrical practices and social phenomena. Thus, the steps of explorations had hardly touched the origins of theatre. Probably not until Jerzy Grotowski (b. 1933), was the theatre itself totally explored and reformed. His research delved into the very roots and

essence of theatre, thoroughly penetrating the whole theatre tradition, and creatively transforming it.

Like Stanislavski and Brecht, Grotowski did not produce his theatrical views all at once. His work involved a long period of work and many stages of development, exploration, and investigation. His contributions to and influence on the contemporary theatre have been confirmed by both theatre historians and critics. After 1965, his influence on theatrical practice has been greater than that of the other schools. Particularly influential have been his exploration of the actor-spectator relationship and his exhaustive research on the art of the actor. The latter is probably more important than the former. As Peter Brook states:

Grotowski is unique. . . . Because no-one else in the world, to my knowledge, no-one since Stanislavski, has investigated the nature of acting, its phenomenon, its meaning, the nature and science of its mental-physical-emotional processes as deeply and completely as Grotowski.¹

Regarding the methods of the actor's training, Grotowski has acknowledged his debt to many predecessors of different traditions and schools. He writes:

I have studied all the major actor-training methods of Europe and beyond. Most important for my purpose are: Dullin's rhythm exercises, Delsarte's investigations of extroversive and introversive reactions, Stanislavski's work on "physical actions," Meyerhold's bio-mechanical training, Vakhtangov's synthesis. Also particularly stimulating to me are the training techniques of oriental theatre--specifically Peking Opera, Indian Kathakali, and Japanese No theatre.²

All these elements provide Grotowski the preliminary material for his research. But he maintains:

The method which we are developing is not a combination of techniques borrowed from these sources. We do not want to teach the actor a predetermined set of skills or give him a "bag of tricks."³

His studies of and response to the already established methods are creative. "He has transformed most of his borrowing and made them his own."⁴

In speaking of the forerunners of Grotowski's research, Ludwik Flaszen, one of the collaborators at Grotowski's Laboratory Theatre, asserts that Stanislavski and Meyerhold are the most important among all the foreign practices.⁵ He says, "The most important connection [between Grotowski and Stanislavski] is the concept of the actor's pre-eminence."⁶ About Meyerhold, he continues:

For us, Meyerhold was important not as the formulator of concrete exercises or techniques, but as the inspiration of the theme that "Biomechanics exists in the fact that behind each gesture of the actor, the whole of his body stands."⁷

Flaszen seems to suggest that Stanislavski and Meyerhold have provided for Grotowski the direction and fundamental principles of his exploration, as well as the point of departure.

The following study, however, is an attempt to deal with the connections between Grotowski and the classical Chinese theatre. Since Grotowski's works are deeply rooted in his own tradition, reflecting his specific style and aesthetic outlook, a discussion of the relationship between his productions and Chinese theatre is impossible. Therefore, the emphasis of the present study is placed upon the aspects of actor's training, about which the concrete accounts of Grotowski's program are recorded in considerable detail in Towards a Poor Theatre by

Eugenio Barba.⁸ Moreover, an examination of Grotowski's contact with Chinese theatre will also be provided; such an investigation may shed another light on the influence of this foreign tradition on the development of Grotowski's ideas on actor's training. To avoid travesties, the present study is limited to the forming period (1958-61) of Grotowski's group, and their transition to the second period (1962-69) of the development.

Starting his career in a rather conventional theatre, Grotowski began to question what was unique and indispensable to theatre.⁹ He came to believe that the direct interaction between actor and spectator, which film and television are unable to achieve, is what makes theatre unique. He, therefore, concluded that theatre can exist without anything but actors and spectators. His conviction led him to abandon the conventional proscenium arch stage in favor of an open space. He describes his theatre as a "poor theatre" in which the superfluous elements, such as elaborate scenery, costume, music, lighting effects, and so forth, have been eliminated. Logically, his concentration has focused on the art of the actor and the exploration of the "empty space." "Consequently, two central concepts have dominated Grotowski's work: the notion of the theatre as a ritualistic and communal experience, and the belief that theatre should be reduced to its essential elements."¹⁰

The development of Grotowski's and his company's creative work has been divided into three periods: "The first period covers the years 1958-61; the second includes the years 1962-69; the third began in 1970 and continues to the present."¹¹ The first period may be described as a preparatory period for further development. Zbigniew Osiński, in his

discussion entitled it, "In Search of Autonomous Theatre."¹² His accounts about the activities and efforts of Grotowski's group during this period show that they concentrated on the search for new theatrical elements in their productions. Their work was characterized by elimination of conventional concerns of production. "The point of departure of the theatre of the Thirteen Rows was marked by a declaration of war against the existing theatre."¹³

The second period, which was described as "The Way to the Poor Theatre,"¹⁴ is marked by:

a general departure from theatrical elements of production in favor of the work with actors, first of all as master craftsmen, then more and more as human individuals; further explorations in the sphere of spatial patterns, which were different for every production, with actor-spectator relationship in mind; considerable interest in the problems of myths and ritual; and the crystallization in practice of the creative concept of "poor theatre."¹⁵

Of the different stages of development of the group, this period is probably most theatrically active. "In the early 1970s, Grotowski announced that he was moving out of the theatre per se."¹⁶ From then on, the direction of Grotowski's company was marked by activities towards para-theatrical explorations.

From its foundation at Opole in 1959 to 1970 at Wrocław, the company's activities were "strictly theatrical."¹⁷ Their work has been considered as an intrinsically organic progression. As Robert Findlay has observed:

From its inception, Grotowski's group has been devoted to a rigorous physical, vocal, and mental discipline and an artistically systematic exploration of the possibilities of theatrical medium.

Such exploration led during the 1960s toward research into the actor's art and by extension into experiments with the actor/audience relationship and the arrangement of theatrical space. Each new production developed as the logical artistic outgrowth of what had been learned through previous experiments.¹⁸

He further suggests that "the more recent paratheatrical work seems in reality the natural artistic extension of earlier theatrical experiments."¹⁹

During the years 1959-62, a systematic program for actor's training was organized through work and research.²⁰ Similar to the development of other elements, the exercises also underwent an evolution. As Grotowski himself states, "Certain elements from these [earlier] exercises were retained in the training during the period that followed, but their aim has changed."²¹ The evolution of the exercises, corresponding to the creative purposes of the group, may be considered as a logical development within the group. However, equally important stimuli for Grotowski perhaps came from the inspirations he gained from his studies of foreign theatres in different periods. According to Raymonde Temkine, Grotowski's interest in Stanislavski dates back to his school years (1951-55).²² In the period 1955-56 he attended a directing session in Moscow where he became interested in Meyerhold.²³ At the same time, his interest in the Orient was increasing.

Temkine has suggested that Grotowski's ancestors "were particularly interested in the Orient, and Jerzy Grotowski sees in them the roots of his interest in the Far East."²⁴ Right after his study in Moscow, Grotowski went to central Asia.

His health worsening, Grotowski obtained a fellowship to central Asia, where he thought the climate would be beneficial. Here he discovered a country that captured his imagination, and he made a start on what was the basis of his later approaches to Sanskrit and Oriental philosophy. He examined the reasons behind its interest for him, but decided that this system of thought was not for Europeans; they must look for another cradle. He escaped the powerful attraction; common sense led him back to the traditions of men on the near side of the Urals.²⁵

Next to this show of his interest in the Orient, the most significant and concrete experience for Grotowski is perhaps his study at a Chinese actor's training academy in 1962. Temkine comments:

The Orient did not cease to fascinate him and, . . . goaded by an interest which by then had become professional, he left for China. . . . There he made contact with what remained of the thousand-year-old art of Chinese opera; once having enjoyed its peak, but then condemned and dismantled.²⁶

Grotowski's impression, according to the above statement, about Chinese theatre can be readily understood, for his stay in China occurred right before the Cultural Revolution (1966-69).

The documentation available in English about Grotowski's contact with Chinese theatre does not add any more to Temkine's accounts. However, in viewing the training program of Grotowski's group between 1959 and 1962, it is not difficult to ascertain that Grotowski's study of Chinese theatre developed prior to 1962. About the sources of the exercises, Eugenio Barba mentions that "the training consists of exercises worked out by the actors or adopted from other systems."²⁷ Barba's record shows an outline of a day's training which is divided into physical exercises and technique of the voice. Notes are provided for almost every exercise to explain its essence and purpose; additional

information concerning the sources and guidance of practice is also included.

In several places, the exercises were said to be based on or directly drawn from the training methods of Chinese theatre. One of the methods of verifying whether respiration is total was taken from the classical Chinese theatre, about which Barba comments that it is "basically the most effective and can be used in any position."²⁸ The method to find a voice base by using a broad belt to fasten tightly around the waist, is also borrowed from the practice of Chinese theatre.²⁹ In Chinese theatre, this method is usually used in breathing exercises and acrobatic fighting scenes in performance. Another basic exercise to open the larynx was said to be prescribed by a Chinese doctor.³⁰ The various exercises under the title, "Exercises in Composition," are "adopted according to the process of the formation of gesticulatory ideograms as in ancient and medieval theatre in Europe as well as African and [O]riental theatre."³¹ In these exercises, the studies of gestures and gaits are most evidently similar to those of Chinese theatre. Both the aim and the execution, however, are completely different from the Chinese practice. Barba points out that these exercises are not designed for "seeking fixed ideograms as, for example, in the Peking Opera in which, in order to portray a particular flower, the actor makes a specific and unchangeable gesture inherited from centuries of tradition."³² On the contrary, new ideograms are constantly sought in accordance with immediate impulses and associations.

Apart from the above exercises explicitly identified with Chinese theatre, there are other examples in Grotowski's program which

apparently parallel the practice of Chinese theatre. Most evident are the seven exercises of "leaps and somersaults."³³ A training manual of instruction material for acrobatic movements in Chinese theatre edited by Ku Feng contains detailed methods on how to practice thirty-two types of somersaults.³⁴ These drills are reflected in Grotowski's exercises. The only exceptions are the tiger springs combined with somersaults in "battle" situations, using sticks or other weapons. However, these exercises are actually analogous to the combination of somersaults and fighting skills frequently seen on the Chinese stage. Interestingly enough, one of the exercises in the Chinese program called hu-t'iao (tiger spring) finds its counterpart in Grotowski's five tiger spring exercises not only in the way of practice but also in the title.

As in Chinese theatre, these exercises are considered to be fundamental to physical development in Grotowski's group. The difference, however, is that Grotowski uses these exercises as means for the actors to study their own physical body, while in Chinese theatre they are intended to set a foundation for the more complicated and difficult skills to be carried out. In Grotowski's group, personal impulses and spontaneity are equally emphasized as well as physical skills. In Chinese theatre, the somersault exercises are most intensively practiced during the first year of training. They are applied to all the student actors no matter what role types they may be assigned in the future. The exercises serve to help the beginner to overcome the instinctive fear, to loosen the joints, and to develop the muscles. Further, they are incorporated with gestures and body movements, especially for those who play military roles.

The above mentioned are instances of Chinese practice borrowed by Grotowski's group, or parallels between the two. These examples actually comprise only a limited part of the entire program practiced by the group. For further understanding about the two training systems, it may be helpful to view the two practices more broadly and synthetically.

The training process of Chinese theatre has been mentioned in the first chapter. According to Kai Chiao-t'ien (1888-1971), a renowned Chinese wu-sheng (young military role) actor, the first year of training is concentrated on four fundamental exercises: head stand, tiger spring, chien-tzu (a kind of somersault), and small somersaults. These exercises help the actors to acquire a competitive physical condition. Following the first year, the students practice four-sided somersaults, consisting of four different kinds of acrobatic exits and entrances. When the actors accomplish this level of training, they are ready for the more complicated stage techniques. The third year is devoted to martial arts which consist of various sets of practice learned through fighting with the partners. Then, in the fourth year weapons are added to the bare-handed martial arts. There are eighteen kinds of weapons used in Chinese theatre, and for each kind there are five sets of operation. When an actor is equipped with the above skills, he is able to take over a considerably complex role in performance.³⁵

While the emphasis on physical techniques is specifically for the military type of actor, for those who play the other types of roles, the training emphasis is different beginning with the second year. For instance, vocal training becomes more and more demanding for tan (female

role) actors. Vocal training starts with developing vocal organs, especially larynx, tongue, and the position of the teeth. Equal emphasis is placed on discovering accurate breathing and adjusting tones.³⁶ Later, the actor's voice is trained according to different role types. For example, the hsiao-sheng (young male role) sings with a literally "small throat," producing a high-pitched sound. The scholarly role, on the other hand, sings falsetto. There is also training for diction, consisting of practice to differentiate the five tones in Chinese pronunciation. Physical training is not ignored at the expense of vocal training. However, the emphasis is not on acrobatic skills, as in the case of the military role, but is on dance-like gestures, body movements, and manipulation of props.

In Chinese theatre, almost every kind of training is guided by the demand of the prospective role the actor is to play. The exercises, with the exception of fundamentals, are usually shaped into what is needed in the performance. What they learn is intimately tied to the theatricality of productions. To borrow Grotowski's term, the method used in Chinese theatre is a "deductive" method,³⁷ working through the accumulation of skills. The purpose of training for the military type of role is to achieve technical prowess and gymnastic power; the purpose for the other types is to shape an aesthetic body. This is evidently the opposite of Grotowski's inductive method.³⁸

To Westerners, the rigidity of the conventions in Chinese acting may seem to leave no room for the actor's individual creativity. This is not necessarily true in actuality. Unlike Grotowski's group, the individual creativity of Chinese actors comes after all the basics

are mastered. In the cases of those successful Chinese actors, individual creativity plays an important role in their career. Mei Lan-fang has mentioned that "the teacher gives you initial knowledge, but how far you go depends on yourself."³⁹ In his memoir, Kai Chiao-t'ien says, "Even if you have learned all the movements, without deep meditation, the art cannot be perfected."⁴⁰ He mentioned that he used to meditate in lotus position after every exercise he practiced and every role he played.⁴¹ For him, to perfect the art, the actor has to undergo an endless process of physical and psychical training.⁴²

Grotowski's program for actor's training (1959-62), in terms of content and the organization of the whole system, is quite similar to that of Chinese theatre, with the exception of the "Exercises of the-Facial Mask" which is probably taken from the techniques of Indian Kathakali. Osiński has commented, "Their work at that time [the period of 1959-62] was still characterized by searching for technical and professional perfection on many levels."⁴³ Grotowski himself also states, "During this time (1959-62), I was searching a positive technique or, in other words, a certain method of training capable of objectively giving the actor a creative skill that was rooted in his imagination and his personal associations."⁴⁴ In other words, he was searching for the exercises that could answer the question: "How can this be done?."⁴⁵

Later in 1964, in his "The Theatre's New Testament," Grotowski proposed an ideal training system in which many aspects are parallel to the Chinese training system. He states:

Age is as important in the education of an actor as it is to a pianist or dancer--that is, one should not be older than fourteen when beginning. If it were possible, I would suggest starting at an even earlier age with a four year technical course concentrating on practical exercises. . . . The actor's secondary education should then be completed by four years' work as an apprentice actor with a laboratory ensemble during which time he would not only acquire a good deal of acting experience, but would also continue his studies in the fields of literature, painting, philosophy, etc. . . . Thus, after eight years' work of this kind, the actor should be comparatively well equipped for what lies ahead.⁴⁶

This statement reminds us of the long and arduous training, monastic life, and total commitment of the Chinese actor undertaken with the instructor-pupil system. Grotowski's idea seems to grow out of his long years of experiment, but probably also originated from his observation about Chinese training system when he studied there.

In operation, however, there are contrasts between Grotowski's training and that of Chinese. The most evident is that in Grotowski's group, the point of reference of every exercise is the actor's self; whereas in Chinese training, the assigned role becomes the basic guiding force of the training. All the exercises in Grotowski's program are practiced with the precedence of personal associations and immediate subconscious impulses emerging from the actor's self. Scientific research on physical organisms and psychological states come along with the exercises. In this respect, the Chinese system seems unsophisticated; the students simply do what is told and the effort is sometimes consumed by repetition. However, the underlying philosophy of this approach to things is characteristic of the Oriental, which tends to learn and understand things through intuitive method instead of intellectualization. The actor's metaphysical state is developed simply through doing.

In Grotowski's group the exercises are applied to all the members engaging in the work, and each member of the group does them in his own way. There is no preimposition, such as a particular character type in Chinese theatre, upon the actor's work. Spontaneity is emphasized as well as discipline. In Chinese training, spontaneity has little room. Spontaneity is attainable only after the actor's training is completed, and if the actor is talented enough, he can transcend the rigid conventions and incorporate the training he has received with his personal creativity. Another apparent difference is that Grotowski emphasizes ensemble work, whereas the Chinese training focuses on the techniques of the individual actor.

From 1962 on, Grotowski's group underwent a new phase of evolution. We have already examined the general characteristics of the second period as different from those of the first period. Among all the elements, the research on the actor's art was perhaps most crucial. Osiński describes, "About the period 1962-68 Jerzy Grotowski will say: 'We began to focus all our attention and all the forms of our activity, above all [, on] the art of actor.'"⁴⁷ After the first period, their research on exercises technically applicable to the group has been accomplished, and the members of the group have already acquired fundamental skills.

Concerning the change into the second period, Grotowski states that "all the exercises which merely constituted an answer to the question: 'How can this be done?' were eliminated."⁴⁸ He further explains:

The exercises have now become a pretext for working out a personal form of training. The actor must discover those resistances and

obstacles which hinder him in his creative task. Thus the exercises become a means of overcoming these personal impediments. The actor no longer asks himself: "How can I do this?." Instead, he must know what not to do, what obstructs him. . . . That is what I mean by via negativa: a process of elimination.⁴⁹

Regarding the operation and concentration of the exercises after the first period, Grotowski suggests:

The difference between the training of 1959-62 and the subsequent phase is most marked in the physical and vocal exercises. Most of the basic elements of the physical exercises have been retained, but they have been oriented towards a quest for contact: the receiving of stimuli from the exterior and reaction to these. The resonators are still used in the vocal exercises, but these are now set in action through various types of impulses and contact with the exterior.⁵⁰

The above statements reveal several characteristics of their development: the concentration in the exercise is placed on the psychical plane of every individual actor rather than on skills; the search is extended from the actor's self to the interaction between the actor and the immediate, given conditions; the actor does not look at himself as an actor but rather as a man, a human being. In other words, the exercises do not exist for their own sake, but they serve as a springboard from which the actor moves toward spiritual discipline, and further toward a creative act, which has little to do with materialistic concerns.

The evolution was resulted from the awareness of the group. They discovered that the difficulties and blockages emerging were different for each of them. They also came to understand that the exercises were "a preparatory technique and nothing more."⁵¹ Grotowski explains:

If someone among us, by repeating many times a movement or evolution, somehow discovered its mastery, he knew how to do it, "he knew it"; and then--if there was no risk, no necessary concentration, no unconscious adjustment of his entire nature, he would do it correctly, with precision, but again, as the being divided into consciousness and the body. He was not one with his body, but separated from it, as it were, divided. He efficiently controlled himself, and that was all.⁵²

"It is a question of considering the exercise of the actor as a reform of the self, an amplification of the self . . . through conquest of the role [the actor attains] possession of the self."⁵³ The idea in these statements is further developed into what Grotowski called "holy actor"--a metaphor, implying "a person who, through his art, climbs upon the stake and performs an act of self-sacrifice."⁵⁴

In the autumn of 1960, Grotowski's company produced "a Polish travesty of the ancient Indian dramatic fable, Shakuntala, based on Kalidasa."⁵⁵ According to Osiński, this production marked the starting point of Grotowski's striving for organizing the ritual happening between the actors and the audience, and his seeking for a system of signs applicable in his theatre.⁵⁶ Grotowski saw the significance of this production in 1968, he expresses:

We perceived fairly early that we could look on our own ground for the sources of ritual play, analogous to that which has still survived in some countries. Where does it still exist? Mainly in the oriental theatre: even lay theatre, such as the Peking Opera, has a ritual structure, constitutes a ceremonial with articulated signs, established by tradition, repeated in the same way in every performance; it is a kind of language, and ideogram of gestures and behavior.⁵⁷

Although the statement is an after-thought, it seems to imply that the production reinforces his motivation to study the Oriental theatre.

Coincidentally, he had a chance to go to China in 1962, he, therefore, spent a year studying Chinese theatre which is known for its definite gestures and other external expressions.

Some thoughts about the changes of Grotowski's research possibly related to his study in China follow. In viewing the activities of the group after 1962, there is little directly associated with Chinese theatre. Moreover, it should be remembered that Grotowski was fully aware that the techniques of different traditions cannot be adopted literally. He was constantly searching for techniques which would impinge upon his own idea. Here are some comments about Grotowski's response to Chinese theatre after 1962. Temkine states:

The atmosphere grows confined and within it signs and figures lose their substance, however admirable they may have remained. The mastery is extreme, the artistic conscience is highly elevated, but the European actor must only borrow techniques from Chinese opera. These are not effective outside their land of origin. Such techniques can become an enriching factor only when integrated into a coherent method. In this manner, new meaning is infused into them.⁵⁸

Grotowski also found the rigidity of conventional Chinese acting inapplicable to his theatre. He explains:

When I speak of the actor's expression of signs, I am asked about oriental theatre, particularly classical Chinese theatre (especially when it is known that I studied there). But the hieroglyphic signs of the oriental theatre are inflexible, like an alphabet, whereas the signs we use are the skeletal forms of human action, a crystallization of a role, an articulation of the particular psycho-physiology of the actor.⁵⁹

Nevertheless, apart from the changes in the training program, there is a related idea emerging in Grotowski's research, which may be described as "in search of the form of expression." This is very

likely the element which indirectly relates to his encounter with Chinese theatre. Osiński has commented that when Grotowski's group was working at Opole, "little composition studies" were involved in the exercises.⁶⁰ In other words, research on acting during the first period did not progress to the dimension in which the actor had to articulate a role in terms of signs and thus a "score" was provided. Probably it can be assumed that the supple precision of the gestures and body movements of the Chinese actor, and the clearly delineated sequence of these gestures and movements in Chinese acting have given Grotowski some inspiration for his search of a "form" in acting.

However, what Grotowski sought was not just a formal discipline. He was seeking a kind of articulation of a role which consists of "a spontaneous and 'organic' sequence, resulting from vibrating, dominating impulses."⁶¹ When he was asked about how he combined spontaneity and formal discipline in 1964, he replied:

The elaboration of artificiality is a gesture of ideogram-- sounds and gestures--which evoke associations in the psyche of the audience. . . . This research for artificiality in its turn requires a series of additional exercises, forming a miniature score for each part of the body. At any rate, the decisive principle remains the following: the more we become absorbed in what is hidden inside us, in the excess, in the exposure, in self-penetration, the more rigid must be the external discipline; that is to say the form, the artificiality, the ideogram, the sign. Here lies the whole principle of expressiveness.⁶²

In responding to Artaud's phrase "actors should be like martyrs burnt alive, still signaling to us from their stakes," Grotowski added that "these signals must be articulated, and they cannot just be gibberish or delirious, . . . the whole problem of spontaneity and discipline,

the conjunction of opposites which gives birth to the total act."⁶³

Although Grotowski first came to know Artaud in 1960 through reading a report about Artaud, and he did not read Artaud's The Theatre and Its Double until 1964,⁶⁴ he has given a form for the "signs" which Artaud saw in the Balinese theatre. And in his search of form, Chinese theatre might have contributed to some of Grotowski's ideas.

Studies concerning the relationship between Grotowski and the Oriental theatre consist in Eugenio Barba's Alla ricerca del teatro perduto (In Search of the Lost Theatre) (1965), and Donald Richie's article collected in "On Grotowski--a Series of Critiques."⁶⁵ Barba's work "analyzes the methods of work in Grotowski's theatre confronting them with the methods of Stanislavsky, Artaud, Meyerhold, with the traditions of the Chinese and the Indian theatres."⁶⁶ Unfortunately, the book is in Italian, and I was not able to study it. Using the classical theatre of Japan as an example, Richie's article examines various aspects of Grotowski's works and Asian theatres, including ritualistic nature of the theatre; the treatment of the text; the use of music, sets, costumes, props, and the mask; and the relationship between actor and spectator. Richie's discussion shows some possibilities in dealing with the connections between Grotowski's theatre and the theatres in Asia, different from the present study which has focused on merely the classical Chinese theatre.

In 1967, Grotowski was asked about whether his acting technique is applicable by the other producers, and his answer was that in his work there were the aesthetic and the method. He suggested that the elements of an aesthetic were personal and could not be copied by the

others, "for the result would be neither authentic nor natural."⁶⁷

But he believed that the method could create an objective result. Therefore, if people found his techniques applicable, they were welcomed to adopt them. What he opposed was "having his methods borrowed as new gimmicks for foreign theatres."⁶⁸ It was the same attitude held by Grotowski when he borrowed techniques from other traditions and schools of practice.

The influence of Chinese theatre on Grotowski is on the preliminary level. It contributes some of the materials to Grotowski's program of actor's training. It perhaps also provides an example of training system and the making of the composition of external articulation. Yet all these elements, together with the other techniques Grotowski has borrowed from various traditions of other foreign countries, are transformed into his own creativity. Beyond the preparatory period, the visible elements of foreign influences are gradually welded into Grotowski's own system. In the development of Western contemporary theatre, Grotowski's theatre also marks a new stage of transformation.

Notes

- ¹ Jerzy Grotowski, Towards a Poor Theatre (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), p. 13.
- ² Ibid., p. 16.
- ³ Ibid., p. 16.
- ⁴ Oscar G. Brockett and Robert R. Findlay, Century of Innovation: A History of European and American Theatre and Drama Since 1870 (New York: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1973), p. 748.
- ⁵ Eric Forsythe, "Conversations with Ludiwik Flaszen," Educational Theatre Journal, 30, No. 3 (1978), p. 314.
- ⁶ Ibid., p. 314.
- ⁷ Ibid., p. 314.
- ⁸ Grotowski, pp. 133-204.
- ⁹ Brockett and Findlay, p. 746.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 746-47.
- ¹¹ Tadeusz Burzyński and Zbigniew Osiński, Grotowski's Laboratory, trans. Boleslaw Taborski (Warsaw: Interpress Publishers, 1979), p. 13.
- ¹² Ibid., pp. 13-21.
- ¹³ Ibid., p. 15.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 22-59.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., p. 23.

16 Robert Findlay, "Grotowski's Laboratorium After Twenty Years: Theory and Operation," Kansas Quarterly, 12 (Fall 1980), p. 136.

17 Burzyński and Osifński, p. 9.

18 Findlay, p. 133.

19 Ibid., pp. 136-137.

20 Grotowski, pp. 133-73.

21 Ibid., p. 133.

22 Raymonde Temkine, Grotowski, trans. Alex Szogyi (New York: Avon Books, 1972), p. 49.

23 Ibid., p. 50.

24 Ibid., p. 47.

25 Ibid., p. 50.

26 Ibid., p. 50.

27 Grotowski, p. 134.

28 Ibid., p. 149.

29 Ibid., p. 156.

30 Ibid., p. 152.

31 Ibid., p. 142.

32 Ibid., p. 142.

33 Ibid., p. 138.

34 Ku Feng, ed., Hsi chu wu-kung chiao-ts'ai--chin-tou lien-hsi fa (The instruction material for acrobatic movements--methods of practicing somersaults) (Shanghai: Wen-i ch'u-pan-she, 1960).

35 Ho Man and Kung I-chiang, recorded and edited, Fen-mo Ch'un-ch'iu (The acting experience of Kai Chiao-t'ien) (Peking: Chung-kuo hsi-chu ch'u-pan-she, 1959).

36 Wang Yuan-fu, Kuo-chu i-shu chi-lun (A collection of discussions on the art of Chinese opera) (Taipei: Li-ming wen-hua shih-yeh Co. Ltd., 1980), pp. 195-97.

37 Grotowski, p. 35.

38 Ibid., p. 35.

39 Mei Lan-fang, "My Life on the Stage," Chinese Literature, 11 (1961), p. 25.

40 Ho and Kung, p. 80.

41 Ibid., p. 80.

42 Ibid., p. 15.

43 Burzyński and Osiński, p. 36.

44 Grotowski, p. 133.

45 Ibid., p. 133.

46 Ibid., pp. 50-51.

47 Bruzyński and Osiński, p. 23.

48 Grotowski, p. 133.

49 Ibid., p. 133.

50 Ibid., p. 133.

51 Temkine, p. 112.

52 Burzyński and Osiński, p. 37.

⁵³ Quoted by Temkine, p. 98. The interpolation in square bracket is originally inserted in Temkine's quotation.

⁵⁴ Grotowski, p. 43.

⁵⁵ Burzyński and Osiński, p. 18.

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 18-19.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 19.

⁵⁸ Temkine, p. 50.

⁵⁹ Grotowski, p. 24.

⁶⁰ Burzyński and Osiński, p. 35.

⁶¹ Temkine, p. 111.

⁶² Grotowski, p. 39.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 125.

⁶⁴ Temkine, p. 144.

⁶⁵ Donald Richie et al., "On Grotowski--a Series of Critiques," The Drama Review, 14, No. 2 (Winter 1970), pp. 205-211.

⁶⁶ Le Theatre en Pologne/The Theatre in Poland, 1(89) (1966), p. 31.

⁶⁷ Grotowski, p. 214.

⁶⁸ Peter L. Feldman et al., "On Grotowski--a Series of Critiques," p. 194.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this thesis has been to examine some significant examples of Chinese influence reflected in selected works of Western contemporary theatre. From the eighteenth century to the last few decades, Chinese theatre has come to be recognized by theatrical practitioners in the West as a well-preserved theatrical form, unique in its own way. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the importation and absorption of Chinese theatre were restricted to theatrical chinoiserie and exoticism. Little knowledge about the essential features of Chinese theatre was possessed by the Westerners who introduced this art to the West. Chinese theatre was imported and introduced by priests and missionaries through translations and adaptations of Chinese dramatic works, or by dramatists and directors through applying the techniques of the Chinese spectacles to their creative works. During the last two centuries, these efforts exemplified a rudimentary stage of absorption of this foreign theatrical art. However, no matter how little these predecessors achieved and contributed, they provided at least a starting point and paved the way for further and more meaningful absorption by their followers.

Not until well into the present century was the art of Chinese theatre rediscovered and enthusiastically explored by Western dramatists and directors. The examples discussed in the present study reveal an advanced stage of absorption of Chinese theatre. The phenomenon shows

a trend moving from the level of transposition to transformation. The artists have gradually acquired knowledge about the art of Chinese theatre through their studies, and have come to an understanding concerning the significance, limitations, and dangers of applying this foreign tradition to their art.

Various approaches taken by Thornton Wilder, Bertolt Brecht, and Jerzy Grotowski in absorbing and applying the techniques of Chinese theatre have reflected multiple aspects of the connections between these artists and Chinese theatre. The kinship between Wilder and Chinese theatre lies in dramatic techniques and theatrical devices which, similar to Chinese theatre, grow out of concern for theatricality. Although biographical accounts show little valid evidence of Wilder's contact with Chinese theatre, several techniques and devices demonstrated in his plays are apparently borrowed from the conventions of Chinese theatre. Beyond these borrowings, Chinese theatre offered him a living example of a well-preserved ancient theatrical art.

In Brecht's plays and theoretical writings, the Chinese influence is revealed at various levels, including dramatic techniques, theatrical devices, Chinese philosophical thought, Chinese settings, the art of Chinese acting, and various other materials with Chinese color. Probably no dominant figure of Western contemporary theatre was so thoroughly influenced by Chinese theatre and China as Brecht. More significantly, Brecht's responses to things Chinese are active, and in certain aspects creative. We have seen Chinese dramaturgy re-appear in his plays; Chinese materials being transposed into his works; Chinese examples of acting inspire his theory; and a Chinese model

thematically adopted in The Caucasian Chalk Circle. In his work, certain traces of Chinese influence are left explicit, while others are transformed and welded into his own creativity and style. Throughout his career, the Chinese impact is constantly evident in the process of his creation and re-creation.

Grotowski is a significant example in contemporary theatre. Differing from other dramatists, he actually participated in and studied Chinese theatre, unlike, for example, Wilder and Brecht, who learned from Chinese theatre merely through readings and observations. Contrasting with the case of Brecht, Chinese influence reflected in Grotowski's work is limited to aspects of the actor's training, the art of acting, and perhaps the ritualistic nature of theatre. However, through knowledge of specific techniques and how they may be applied to his work, Grotowski assimilated these elements of Chinese theatre and organically incorporated them in his training system. Furthermore, in his quest to search for the essence and root of theatre, Grotowski is able to transcend cultural boundaries, absorbing preliminary materials from foreign traditions, and transforming these materials into his own style.

The examples I have chosen for discussion are significant in that Wilder and Brecht are contemporaries on both sides of the Atlantic, and Grotowski began his experiments and explorations right after the death of Brecht. In the context of the development of Western contemporary theatre, Wilder's and Brecht's experiments mark a new trend, and Grotowski exemplifies another phase of new development. Although each of them has reached his own individual goals, their experiments as a

whole are historically connected with one another. Among these connections the Chinese influence plays a considerably important role.

The chapter in the present study dealing with Brecht has touched upon issues, such as the similarities of the function of musical elements and the parallel of theme between Brecht's plays and Chinese drama, which have rarely been dealt with. The section concerning Brecht's response to the example of Chinese acting is intended to clarify some of the misunderstandings resultant from the misinterpretation of Brecht's underlying intention in his "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting." In the cases of Wilder and Grotowski, though Chinese influence has sometimes been mentioned by scholars, no elaborate and concrete studies have existed. Therefore, assertions about Chinese influence on Wilder and Grotowski have always been speculative. It is hoped that the present study of these two artists will clarify some of the farfetched theories about Chinese influence.

The absorption of a foreign tradition has its own intriguing elements. It usually requires a long period of time for artists to assimilate and understand the nuances of foreign elements, and to evaluate foreign impacts. However, if an artist is capable of crossing cultural boundaries without losing his own identity, the foreign influence and impact can always provide inspiration, stimulus, and enriching forces. Similar to the phenomenon occurring in Western contemporary theatre in the recent years, the development of modern theatre in my home country, Taiwan, has also been undergoing a process of re-evaluating Western influence and incorporating foreign elements into

its own theatrical tradition to create new and meaningful theatre in the future.

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