



Bertolt Brecht's theatrical concept of alienation effect and the Chinese application and transformation

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Abstract

Inspired by his (mis)reading of Chinese theatre, Bertolt Brecht advanced the concept of the alienation effect as a means of making theatre a more efficient act of resistance against the capitalist social order. Brecht's work first became known in China in 1929. Despite his affinity with Chinese culture, Brecht's reception in China has never been a smooth process due to the interactions of diverse social, political, and cultural factors. Chinese dramatists and scholars began undertaking more rigorous, systematic, and substantial study of Brecht only after 1949. His work was seen as an alternative to the Stanislavsky system, which was dominant in the Chinese theatrical world of the time. Despite interruptions during the Cultural Revolution, the influence of Brecht is now pervasive, and his contribution is evident from the fact that numerous prominent Chinese playwrights and directors claim to be his disciples. By tracing the influence of Brecht and Chinese drama beyond national boundaries, we can gain a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of world drama.

Keywords Bertolt Brecht · Alienation effect · Chinese dramaturgy

After first becoming known to Chinese readers in the 1920s, Bertolt Brecht has successfully aroused the interest of numerous playwrights, artists, and scholars in China.¹ Although he was condemned and his Chinese advocates were either denounced or imprisoned during the Cultural Revolution, his concepts of “alienation effects” and “epic theatre” did contribute significantly to the formation and development of modern Chinese dramaturgy. Zuolin Huang, who was once the director

¹ Some scholars believe that the first article introducing Brecht to Chinese readers is *Zuijin deguo de jutan* [Recent developments in German theatre], a free translation from *The Times Literary Supplement* by Jingshen Zhao published in the magazine *Beixin* in 1929.

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of the Shanghai People's Art Theatre, considered him one of the three key figures of modern world dramaturgy, along with Konstantin Stanislavsky and Lanfang Mei (1894–1961). According to Huang, these three figures represent three equally important systems of dramaturgy in the world, and their theories have all become integral constituents of the Chinese theatrical field.² With an emphasis on realistic representations of life as well as empathy in performance, Stanislavsky was the main influence on Chinese dramaturgy during the 1950s. With his socialist inclinations, Brecht became the lodestar in the Chinese theatrical arena during the 1960s, as his theories were seen as answers to the problems of Stanislavsky's theories as well as inspiration for formal innovations within Chinese theatrical practice. Lanfang Mei, an internationally famous actor in Peking opera, is considered the perfect embodiment of traditional Chinese dramaturgy and represents the highest level of traditional Chinese acting skills if we take the excellence of his demonstration of conventions in terms of gestures, eye expressions, figures, gaits and other acting methods into consideration. As one of the most enthusiastic proponents of Brecht in China, Huang not only took the lead in introducing and promoting Brecht's theory, but also pioneered in the staging of Brecht's plays and the integration of his theory into traditional Chinese dramaturgy. Due to various social, political, and ideological trends during the last 90 years, Brecht's theories have experienced waves of popularity and unpopularity in China. According to Walter Benjamin, a text has an "afterlife," which is "a transformation and renewal of something living,"³ when it is translated into another language and/or adapted into another culture. This "afterlife" in a world system is often independent from the source text and is over-determined by a combination of factors embedded in the target context. Thus, to better understand the "afterlife" of Brecht's works in the Chinese context and the complexities of that "afterlife," we must take a more detailed, nuanced, and in-depth look into the entanglements of various social, political, and cultural formations that inform the context.

The alienation effect and Brecht's (mis)reading of Chinese theatre

The visibility of Brecht in world academia is widely acknowledged. When discussing his achievements, Ronald Speirs states that "'Brechtian' or 'brechtisch' is an established part of cultural vocabulary, referring not only to a method of staging plays, but also to a style of expression, a way of thinking, a way of looking at the world even."⁴ In contemporary Chinese discourse, Brecht is heralded as an avant-garde dramatist and theorist for his courageous formal innovations and his rebellious stance against the sort of rigid realism that was practiced in the Soviet Union. Among his numerous contributions to dramaturgy, the alienation effect is probably his most widely studied innovation. Many scholars assert that this concept was inspired by the performance of Lanfang Mei that Brecht saw during his exile in

² Huang (1989, pp. 269–282).

³ Benjamin (1996, p. 256).

⁴ Speirs (1987, p. 2).

Moscow. In 1935, Mei was invited to the Soviet Union by the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries of the country; during this visit to Moscow, he performed in four important plays: *Cihu* (Killing the Tiger General), *Jinshan Si* (The Golden Mountain monastery), *Guifei zuijiu* (The drunken beauty) and *Dasha yujia* (The fisherman's revenge). As one of the most famous performers of the time, Mei made a hit, and people in Moscow lined up for the performances, which were so successful that "Not a bad word from the reviews of various newspapers"⁵ was heard by the delegation. Amazed by Mei's impeccable performance during this brief encounter, Brecht wrote the often-cited essay "Alienation effects in Chinese acting," the basis of his theory, the following year.

Brecht's study of Chinese culture also contributed to his theoretical formulation. His theories, and his worldview as a whole, were shaped by the thoughts of Chinese philosophers such as Lao Tzu, Confucius, Mencius, Chuang Tzu, and Mo Tzu. He was such an avid admirer of ancient Chinese wisdom that he even had a picture of Confucius on his wall.⁶ Moreover, his theory of dialectics in theatre was very much inspired by his reading of Mao Zedong's *Maodun lun* (On contradictions) in 1954. This influence is best summarized by Antony Tatlow: "Brecht's response to Chinese thought was not a marginal factor at the periphery of his work; it leads to the central questions about the nature and the nature of man."⁷ Brecht "borrowed" many stories freely for his plays, such that some critics even jokingly referred to him as a "plagiarist."⁸ Chinese culture also provided materials for his creation. For example, his play *The Caucasian chalk circle* was inspired by *Bao daizhi zhi kan huilan ji* (Judge Bao and the chalk circle), by Xingdao Li, a minor playwright of the Yuan Dynasty; and his play *The good person of Sichuan* is set in China with Chinese characters. Furthermore, according to Brecht's (mis)reading, alienation effect is one of the distinctive features of Chinese acting. Brecht's observations are full of insights. For example, Chinese theatre is characterized by its use of alienation effects and one of the chief means to achieve alienation effects is the use of symbols. In Chinese theatre, the actors create the environment instead of using various stage properties as their Western colleagues do. For example, a paddle can be used to represent a non-existent boat; a whip can be used to stand for a horse; walking in a large circle symbolizes going a long distance; mere gestures of hands can be used to signify "the forcible opening of a door" even though the door does not exist in reality; and chewing a lock of hair between the lips represents anger or agony. What Brecht most noticed about Chinese drama is the non-existence of the fourth wall, so that the actors can speak directly to the audience and dissociate themselves from their roles in the play by observing and commenting on their own performance before the audience. All of these examples of the alienation effect demonstrate that "The traditional Chinese theatre is fundamentally distinguished from the Western theatre in that it abolishes the illusion of life while the other produces it."⁹ In other words, Chinese theatre

⁵ Quoted in Tian (2012, pp. 127–128).

⁶ In this respect, cf. Tatlow (1977) and Berg-Pan (1979).

⁷ Tatlow (1977, p. 348).

⁸ Benjamin (1998, p. 27).

⁹ Hsia (1982, p. 98).

admits its own “fictionality” while Western bourgeois theatre aims to reproduce the real people and real life on the stage.

Although it provides new perspectives for us to understand Chinese theatre, Brecht’s theory also involves misunderstandings. For example, Brecht points out that “a general will carry little pennants on his shoulder, corresponding to the number of regiments under his command.”¹⁰ In fact, the pennants he describes, called *kaoqi*, do not represent the ranks of the generals or the number of the troops they are commanding; although we are not entirely certain of their practical purposes in battle, they do “contribute significantly to the scale and volume of the armored figure onstage.”¹¹ In all, their function in Chinese theatre is mainly decorative, artistic, and aesthetic. This misinterpretation of a technical issue is a parallel to Brecht’s similar misconception of the relation between actor and character in Chinese theatre: he mistakenly supposes that Chinese actors, unlike Western actors, do not aim to convert themselves into the characters they play. However, Chinese spectators do value the ability of an actor to identify him/herself with the character he/she plays, though the aesthetic elements of characterization in Chinese plays make the characters seem less true to life than their counterparts on the Western stage. In Chinese theatre, elements such as movements, stage speech, song, music, costumes, and stage properties are all carefully orchestrated to achieve empathetic effects. In addition to their strict observation of the conventions laid down by their predecessors in the performance, the actors are also applauded for their ability to move the audience emotionally. Thus, Brecht’s appropriation of Chinese acting to validate his theorization of the alienation effect is in many ways misplaced.

While Brecht may well have conceived these notions long before seeing Mei’s performance, his (mis)reading of Chinese drama not only reinforced his aesthetic ideals but also led him to the conclusion, albeit mistaken, that his ideals were embodied in Chinese theatre. If we historicize and contextualize the entirety of Brecht’s career, we can see that his desire to reform the theatre and his formulation of the alienation effect were influenced by social, political, and aesthetic concerns. Socially speaking, the representation of the complexities of the modern world requires formal innovations. According to Brecht, the world has entered a scientific age in which inventions such as films, the telephone, and the airplane have fundamentally changed people’s lives, and the dramatic representation of the complexities of the modern world requires formal innovations. Modern society has inspired new subject matter that requires new dramatic forms when traditional theatre is no longer sufficient. Brecht believes that art should follow reality and continue searching for, exploring, and creating new techniques, methods, and forms to make a full account of the ever-changing social reality. It was Brecht’s firm belief in formal innovations, particularly that new theatrical forms should take full advantage of advances in science and technology that sparked the debates between him and Lukács. His belief

¹⁰ Brecht (1974, p. 91).

¹¹ Bonds (2008, p. 60).

and practice were inspired by the work of Erwin Piscator who appropriated materials such as newsreel clips, cartoons, diagrams, narrators, large choirs, placards, and projected texts for his theatrical performances. Brecht had worked with Piscator during the 1920s and admired these theatrical innovations.

Brecht's political commitment also calls for formal innovations. After years of shifting political allegiances, he embraced Marxism at the end of the 1920s after his encounters with Marxists such as Karl Korsch, Fritz Sternberg, and Hanns Eisler. His belief in socialism became the guiding force of his later intellectual endeavors, and his belief in the political function of theatre was a direct result of his political philosophy. For Brecht, plays should inspire people to political action and encourage them to "band together" to seek better living conditions. Thus, modern theatre should keep up with the times, and take the initiatives to bring about desired social and political change. This artistic mission puts him in direct contrast with the bourgeois theatre, which aims to present a society with everlasting or "universal" qualities in which everything in the social formation is deemed "inevitable, usual and natural." When "the laws of cause and effect" are kept from the people, attempts to change society are rendered futile and hopeless due to the "unhistorical" nature of the bourgeois theatre. For Brecht, the ideal form of the theatre is epic theatre, in which "the audience was hindered from simply identifying itself with the characters in the play."¹² Epic theatre differs from the Aristotelian theatre in which empathy plays a major role. In contrast to the illusionistic Aristotelian drama, which encourages the audience to sympathize with the characters, epic theatre aims to arouse the reason, rather than the emotions of the spectators.

The "non-political" or de-politicizing nature of the bourgeois aesthetics lies in its erasure of the possibilities of change by covering up the true nature of things. These illusions paralyzed people's political awareness and fighting will. To shatter the illusions created by the Aristotelian theatre and to prompt the audience to use their reason to think, the alienation effect aims to make the "natural" seem "unnatural." Thus, the actors should remain "alienated" or detached from the characters they are playing. Through this process of alienation, life represented in the theatre will be re-experienced and perceived in new ways. As Peter Brooker observes, "*Verfremdung* would therefore produce a jolt of surprise and illumination, as the familiar and predictable were not only historicized and seen afresh but 'seen through.'"¹³ Brecht further noted that the spectators should avoid identifying themselves with the actors on the stage: "The spectator was no longer in any way allowed to submit to an experience uncritically (and without practical consequences) by means of simple empathy with the characters in a play."¹⁴ Devices such as placards, slides, songs, filmstrips, and masks are introduced to make things seem "estranged" and "defamiliarized" with the aim of keeping the audience "alienated" from the play's world and alert to the "constructed" nature of the theatre.

¹² Brecht (1974, p. 91).

¹³ Thomson and Sacks (2006, p. 215).

¹⁴ Brecht (1974, p. 71).

For Brecht, the alienation effect is of great significance in the ideological struggles. It lays bare the true essence of life “by uncovering and revealing it, thereby encouraging a knowledge of the conditions of alienation as historically produced and open to transformation in the real world.”¹⁵ This allows the audience to maintain a critical distance from the play’s world and approach it through reason rather than emotion. Ronald Speirs points out the political implications of such aesthetic decisions: “Brecht contrasted his own concept of *Verfremdung*, which can be variously translated as estrangement, alienation or de-familiarisation. The term refers to two related effects: the inhibition of emotional identification, and the opening of a fresh perspective on aspects of life that tend to be protected from critical examination by our over-familiarity with them. Brecht defined the learning process produced by *Verfremdung* as a dialectical, ‘triadic’ progression, moving from ‘understanding’ (in a false, habitual manner), through ‘non-understanding’ (because of the de-familiarizing presentation), and back to ‘understanding’ (in a new way).”¹⁶ In all, by shattering the illusions in Aristotelian theatre and keeping the audience from empathizing with the actors, the alienation effect inspires critical awareness and a desire to change the world.

Repoliticization and the construction of a Chinese Brecht

As noted above, the translation and introduction of Brecht’s theories and works began long before the founding of the People’s Republic of China. His high appraisal of Chinese culture and the intricate relationship of Chinese culture to his theoretical formulations added to his appeal in China. Zuolin Huang first read Brecht’s article on Chinese theatre in 1936 when he was studying drama with Michel Saint-Denis at London Theatre Studio, and became an enthusiastic follower and promoter of Brecht’s theories and creative works. However, Brecht’s popularity in China was not instantaneous, despite the continuous translation and introduction of his works; indeed, serious academic study of Brecht in China did not truly begin until after 1949. To ensure smooth and rapid development on all fronts, the newly-founded People’s Republic of China sought to learn from other socialist countries in order to enhance its profile in the world arena. Scholars, thinkers, and intellectuals who were deemed progressive in other countries were also more than welcome, though their ideological nuances would need to be examined and possibly adjusted to the country’s sociopolitical needs. As a prominent socialist author, Brecht was considered a fellow-traveller in China; his political “legitimacy” of Brecht was more or less assured. However, his reception as a Marxist playwright and theorist was still determined by the entanglement and interaction of various factors, including the government on the one hand and the artistic/academic communities on the other.

Most scholars agree that the first “Brecht craze” arose in the 1950s due to the government intervention. Two events during this period brought Brecht into the

¹⁵ Thomson and Sacks (2006, p. 217).

¹⁶ Speirs (1987, p. 43).

limelight of the Chinese theatrical community and accelerated the popularity of Brecht's works. During the first National Drama Festival in 1956, Korea Senda, a renowned Japanese director, visited China and was warmly received by Tian Han. As a Brecht expert, Senda was surprised that few in the Chinese theatrical community seemed to know much about Brecht, and criticized the Chinese theatre as being too sterile, monotonous, and out of touch with the outside world. Tian, the president of the Chinese Theatre Association at the time, was embarrassed by Senda's comments, and took various initiatives to encourage the translation and study of Brecht's works afterwards. German writer Günther Weisenborn also contributed to the reception of Brecht in China. When he met with Mao Zedong in 1956, he spoke highly of Brecht's achievements, even telling Mao that Brecht was a more significant writer than he was.¹⁷ Thanks to the mobilizing influence of Tian and Mao, a "Brecht craze" soon swept across the country, and 1959 witnessed the real popularity of Brecht in China. In that year, the Chinese government sponsored a series of activities to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the People's Republic of China and the German Democratic Republic. As "the most radical theorist and practitioner of twentieth-century theatre," Brecht became an ideal embodiment of the intimate relationship between these two countries.¹⁸ Not only did his theories become popular in China, but many of his creative writings were also translated, including *Selected works of Brecht*, translated by Feng Zhi (a renowned poet and scholar) and Wentang Du, published in 1959 by People's Literature Publishing House, one of the leading publishers owned by the government.

To a large extent, the government initiated the reception and assimilation of Brecht's theory during this period, and many related activities were directly imposed from above. However, this "Brecht craze" was cut short abruptly during the Cultural Revolution, during which the most-performed plays were the "Eight model revolutionary dramas." In that period, even Stanislavsky was labelled a bourgeois reactionary art authority, and Brecht was attacked for "spreading pacifist poison."¹⁹ Zhilin Bian, an influential Chinese poet, translator, and literature scholar, was also persecuted for his high praise of Brecht's plays, while Huang, his best-known disciple in China, was imprisoned for 3 years.

After the Cultural Revolution, the driving force of the revival of the study of Brecht came mainly from the inside. Due to the alliance between the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union, arts and literary works from the Soviet Union thronged into China and enjoyed unparalleled prestige. During these honeymoon days, the Stanislavsky system was widely put into practice in China. As Yong Chen points out, "Measures have been taken to ensure that the Stanislavsky system can be mastered and promoted in a more complete, systematic, and exhaustive way. These measures include providing teaching positions for foreign experts,

¹⁷ Although some sources claim that Weisenborn and Mao met in 1957, they actually met on Nov. 11, 1956, and the details of their conversation were later published by *Liaoning ribao* [Liaoning Daily] on April 14, 1957. See Mao (1992, p. 152).

¹⁸ Thomson and Sacks (2006, p. 193).

¹⁹ Chen (1982, p. 55).

the stipulation of teaching syllabus and methods, the massive training of excellent directors and actors as well as numerous performance practices. This kind of unrestrained promotion of Stanislavsky cannot be seen in any other country in the whole world.²⁰ The Stanislavsky system did contribute to the modernization of theatre education in China; however, its single-minded emphasis on empathy and the realistic representation of life gradually became detrimental to the healthy development of Chinese theatre. In an increasingly complex society, this monolithic situation propels the theatrical community to seek out and experiment with new forms. Discussing the backwardness of the theatrical development at that time, Yangzhong Ding notes that “the screen scripts are uninspiring, the directing methods are outdated, and the performing skills are old-fashioned.”²¹ Numerous directors and scholars, such as Zuolin Huang, became disillusioned with the conservative, monotonous, and suffocating atmosphere within the theatrical circle, and saw Brecht as an antidote or counter-force to the Stanislavsky system, which was itself an exemplar of the Aristotelian tradition that Brecht criticized. Brecht’s “alienation effect” and his experiments with new forms were highly valued by Huang who once again served as the spokesman for Brecht. Conferences were held to promote Brecht and his work. In 1981, for example, an international symposium on Brecht was held in Hong Kong with participants from Hong Kong, Japan, India, the US, Canada, England, and Germany. In 1985, the Central Academy of Drama organized the first Brecht Symposium in mainland China, and some of Brecht’s plays were performed during the symposium. In 1998, another symposium was held in Beijing to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the birth of Brecht. These conferences and the revival of interest in Brecht exemplified the desire of Chinese dramatists to revitalize a tradition that, to them, had grown dull.

Due to the interactions between forces from both the inside and the outside, different aspects of Brecht’s theory were highlighted during different stages in the whole process of its “traveling” to China. In other words, the construction of the “Chinese Brecht” is tightly interwoven with his political utility. This often one-sided introduction of Brecht in China is the reason why Xian Zhou argues that Brecht has been depoliticized in China. According to Zhou, Chinese dramatists and scholars ignored the political dimension of the Brechtian theatre, so that “Brecht was presented by the Chinese theatrical circle as an avant-garde and formalist dramatist whose epic theatre and techniques dramatically changed the forms of contemporary Chinese theatre.”²² However, Zhou is only partially right in his observations, as there are numerous examples of Chinese Brecht scholarship that do not uphold this “depoliticized” image. One such work is Bian’s (1980) study *Bulaixite xiju yinxiangji* (Impressions on Brecht’s drama). At the very beginning of his study, Bian points out that “Brecht’s works not only provide us with thought-provoking artistic enjoyment, original skills of artistic creation and enlightening ideological education, but also powerful weapons for political struggles.”²³ When commenting on

²⁰ Chen (2004, p. 108).

²¹ Ding (1983, p. 24).

²² Zhou (2011, pp. 144–151).

²³ Bian (1980, p. 1).

the formal innovations in Brecht's drama, Bian did not forget to mention that "To serve the cause of political revolution, Brecht did not cling to a particular form. His life-long preoccupation with the experiment of new artistic forms is not for the sake of the form itself. Instead, he invented new forms in order to better represent the new ideas and new thoughts in the ever-changing world."²⁴ As the first systematic study of Brecht in China, Bian's work not only comments on the formal novelties of Brecht's drama, but also highlights the political dimension of Brecht's works. Bian's study and others like it demonstrate that politics has never been absent from the reception of Brecht in China.

Instead of being "depoliticized," it is perhaps more accurate to say that Brecht has been "repoliticized" due to the differences between the political situations in which he wrote and in which he is read. However, Brecht's political utility has always been a central concern to the reading of his work since the founding of the People's Republic of China. Careful adjustments have been monitored to suit the "local" political agenda. As a matter of fact, the appropriation of foreign theories and works is always influenced by "local" needs. This mechanism helps to account for the dialectical tension between the globalizing and localizing tendencies of world drama during the process of its "traveling." After the Cultural Revolution, people gradually came to realize that modernism could also be appropriated to promote socialist politics, so that in general, Chinese scholars tend to sympathize more with Brecht than with Lukács in their debate. In judging whether a work is "progressive" or not, Brecht was more concerned with the content of literature, while Lukács' primary concern was its form. Thus, the shift of emphasis within the reception and reading of Brecht or the selective readings of Brecht is strongly influenced by changes in the political climate.

Zuolin Huang's staging of Brecht's drama and modern Chinese dramaturgy

Western drama was introduced to China at the beginning of the 20th century. The beginning of modern Chinese drama can be traced to the performance of *Camille* and *Uncle Tom's cabin* by a group of overseas Chinese students in Japan in 1907.²⁵ Ibsen, Stanislavsky, and Brecht exerted the greatest influence upon later developments in Chinese theatrical history. As the father of modern drama in the West, Ibsen helped promote the New Culture Movement by introducing new values and subjects into the Chinese theatrical arena. In the Chinese context, Nora, the protagonist of Ibsen's *A doll's house*, has become an embodiment of women's struggle for dignity, personal liberation, and self-fulfillment, which is in alignment with the spirit of the May 4th Movement. The apprentice system, in which the masters train

²⁴ Ibid, p. 27.

²⁵ Cf. Guo (2003, pp. 23–25).

young actors personally, is essential to traditional Chinese theatre. With his systematic theory of dramaturgy, Stanislavsky helped modernize and update the training and acting systems in Chinese theatre, while Brecht's theatrical thoughts facilitated formal innovations in Chinese theatrical circles. However, we should remember that Brecht's ever-lasting fame not only rests on his theoretical work, but also on his creative writings. Though his drama is best known in literary history, he also wrote novels and poems. The staging of *Mother Courage and her children* in 1959 and *The life of Galileo* in 1979, both directed by Zuolin Huang, can be regarded as two milestones in the history of his reception in China.

In October 1959, Brecht's *Mother Courage and her children* was performed in Shanghai by the Shanghai People's Art Theatre. The staging of this play was also part of the celebration of the tenth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the German Democratic Republic. Zuolin Huang directed the play with the help of Feng Zhi and the East German Embassy. However, only 40% of the seats were sold and most of the audience left before the play came to an end. Novelist Ba Jin is said to be the only one who watched the whole play. Consulting the recollections of Huang and his contemporaries, we can conclude that the failure of the performance can be attributed to several factors, one of which is the lack of time for preparation and rehearsal. The actor only had about 3 months to put on the performance, and the translation of the script took 2 months. Another important reason for the failure of the production is that Chinese audiences were not accustomed to this kind of theatre. For Chinese audiences, the theatre is mainly a place to relax, to entertain themselves, and to satisfy their "escapist desires;" thus, abstract ideas and reasoning are not what people expect from the theatre. They expect to see exotic, entertaining, and gaudy scenes. Third, during this period Huang was too faithful a disciple of Brecht. He sought to put on a performance using the alienation effect, as desired by Brecht, while ignoring the aesthetic expectations of the Chinese audience. The long dialogues, drab clothing, and overt philosophizing present in the performance seemed boring and uninspiring to theatergoers who were more interested in fancy costumes, exotic settings, and exciting stories. From the perspective of the audience, this performance was an unsuccessful experiment, and even Huang himself acknowledged its failure by admitting, "Among the eighty-eight plays I directed, his *Mother Courage and her children* is the biggest failure. This is mainly due to the 'alienation effect' because the audience were 'alienated' out of the theatre."²⁶ Though Huang's hasty endeavor was doomed to failure, this performance, commissioned by the government, made Chinese audiences aware of the existence of an alternative tradition of theatre. It also paved the way for the future reception of Brecht in China and prepared Huang for his future success.

The real success of Brecht's plays in China came in March 1979 when China Youth Art Theatre performed *The life of Galileo*, jointly directed by Zuolin Huang and Yong Chen. This time Huang learned from his previous heartbreaking mistakes, and they made the aesthetic expectations, the understanding, interest, and reception of the audience their primary concerns for this production. Yong Chen made

²⁶ Huang (1979, pp. 291–292).

this point very clear: "In order to make the roles of the characters clear to the audience, we borrowed, in character representation, make-up, and costume, the 'character illuminating principle' from Chinese opera and coupled the stage language with precise and incisive gestures in order to reveal the individual types and their social role."²⁷ As the first foreign play staged by this theatre after the fall of the "Gang of Four," the production drew a full audience and ran for more than 80 performances. The literati and academia also celebrated the success of this play, and more than 40 articles about it were published just in Beijing alone. Many well-known scholars both at home and abroad, such as Luogeng Hua, Yang Zhou, and Zhilin Bian, expressed their appreciation of this performance.²⁸ However, its immediate and immense success was also intertwined with the social context in which it was performed. As Yong Chen recalled, "Our choice of Galileo was not just a matter of an artistic experiment for the sake of introducing another dramatic school to the Chinese public, nor did we merely intend to criticize the mental imprisonment and the cultural dictatorship under the Gang of Four, we introduced this artistic product to Chinese society mainly because of the meaning of the play."²⁹ After the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, Galileo's bravery in discovering scientific truth and challenging unjust authority was seen as an inspiration. In the play, people in high positions, such as the pope, are presented as masked villains who mercilessly persecuted those who sided with the progress of science. Many people, especially the intellectuals who were victimized during the Cultural Revolution, sympathized with the tragic fate of Galileo. In a nuanced manner, the play gave voice to intellectuals' long-suppressed indignation against the "Gang of Four" for the sufferings and other unjust treatments inflicted upon them during the Cultural Revolution. In addition to using ballad singers as narrators, Huang also introduced placards into the theatre to achieve alienation effects. To make the play easier for the audience to comprehend, Huang not only cut long conversations and avoided difficult technical terms, but also omitted those profound philosophical and religious discussions that were not familiar to the audience. Huang's alterations to the story helped audiences find relevance in the performance, but the greatest contribution to the production's success was the integration of the aesthetic principles of Stanislavsky and Brecht with traditional Chinese dramaturgy.

After that, many of Brecht's other plays by Brecht were also translated and staged. China Youth Art Theatre performed *The Caucasian chalk circle* in 1985 and *The three penny opera* in 1998, and *The good person of Sichuan* was staged by the Central Academy of Drama near the end of 1987. However, these two performances not only mark two different stages in the reception of Brecht's drama, but also represent two different ways of integrating Brecht into the Chinese context. From this, we can see that successful transplantations of foreign cultural products should find a balance between "foreignization" and "domestication." Huang failed in his first attempt to introduce Brecht to Chinese audiences when he aimed at creating

²⁷ Chen (1982, p. 93).

²⁸ Chen (1999, p. 27).

²⁹ Chen (1982, p. 89).

a faithful reproduction of Brecht. Learning from his previous experiences, Zuolin Huang began to prioritize the aesthetic expectations of the Chinese audience. Based on his first-hand knowledge of Brecht in introducing Brecht's theory and staging his plays, Huang also gradually advanced his conceptualization of *Xieyi* theatre, which is a crystallization of the synthesis of the aesthetic principles and ideals of Stanislavsky, Brecht, and traditional Chinese theatre. The purpose of *Xieyi* theatre is to convey the inner spirit or essence of things, rather than a photographic reproduction of the real life. The fundamental characteristic of *Xieyi* theatre can be explained as follows, a sentiment to which Huang refers frequently: "It cannot be called a performance when the acting does not resemble life; it's not art when it resembles too much."³⁰ Various artistic means and forms can be employed to guarantee such effects, and Huang regards the performance of *Zhongguo meng* (China dream) as a perfect demonstration of such an ideal. In *China dream*, Mingming, an actress, moves to the United States and falls in love with a young American lawyer called John. Before this geographical displacement, Mingming was in love with Zhiqiang when she was exiled to a mountain village during the Cultural Revolution. In the play, dream and reality alternate to dramatize the different dreams cherished by each of them as well as the conflicts between Chinese and Western values. Following the Stanislavsky system, the delicate feelings of the characters are vividly conveyed; however, the performance also depended on "alienation effects" to ensure that the audience could follow and think about what is taking place on the stage. Furthermore, because spoken drama actors are not well trained in the conventional stylized movements of traditional Chinese drama, the performance thus adopts extensively refined gestures and movements based on *eukinetics*.³¹ The play's frequent shifts between time and space are ideographically indicated by the performers' gestures and dances on stage to ensure the fluidity and smoothness of the whole play. These measures make the play a perfect synthesis of these different traditions.

Apart from Huang, many other influential playwrights and directors, such as Xingjian Gao, Minglun Wei, and Xiaozhong Xu, also publicly acknowledged their indebtedness to Brecht. To a certain extent, their success depended on their ability to appropriate Brecht to serve their own ends. When adapting *The good person of Sichuan* into *chuanjü*, one of the major regional drama forms in China, Minglun Wei omitted plot elements that were not familiar to the Chinese audience, and replaced them with other common themes and subjects in Chinese literature. With its emphasis on the dimension of reason in theatre, Xiaozhong Xu's "expressive aesthetic" is obviously indebted to Brecht. Given the above description, we can come to the conclusion that both Brecht's reception in China and his appropriation of Chinese theatre are actually "recreations." In sum, by highlighting reason and shattering the illusionistic tradition of theatre, Brecht introduced another tradition to the Chinese audience, creating a milestone in the development of Chinese drama.

The introduction of Brecht to China has injected new vigor into Chinese theatre and facilitated its modern transformation and development. Traditional Chinese

³⁰ Huang (1989, p. 5).

³¹ Ibid, p. 541.

theatre pays more attention to the excellence of the skills of the actors, and the same stories can be performed again and again. The theatregoers themselves can even recite the lines in the play, and they still keep going to the theatre to enjoy the actors' talents in "singing, recitation, acting, and acrobatic fighting," but not the story. The conventions of traditional Chinese drama remained unchanged for hundreds of years, but the problem is that traditional theatre cannot adequately respond to the complexities of the modern world, and contemporary life is not its main concern. Brecht insists that "art follows reality" and "radical transformation of the theatre... has simply to correspond to the whole radical transformation of the mentality of our time."³² By learning from Brecht, more and more playwrights and directors began to tackle contemporary issues and employ modern techniques and means to dramatize modern ways of life, values, thoughts, aesthetic demands, and longings. Huang is an exemplary figure in the adaptation of contemporary life into Chinese drama. Evidently his play *Kangmeiyuanchao dahuobao* (The living newspaper of the war of resistance against the U.S. and aid to Korea, 1951) is about the Korean War; *Bamian hongqi ying feng piao* (Eight red flags are fluttering, 1958) depicts the Great Leap Forward, which started in 1958; and *Jiliu yong jin* (Brave the current, 1963) focuses on the economic developments of the early 1960s. His 1987 play *China dream*, discussed above, deals with the cultural conflicts between China and the West, an even more up to date theme then.

Other playwrights and directors appropriated characters and stories from the past for similar purposes. Minglun Wei, who enjoyed great popularity in the 1980s, also acknowledged the influence of Brecht on his work. The main character of his play *Pan jinlian: yige nuren de chenlunshi* (Pan Jinlian: The history of a fallen woman) is based on a character from Shi Nai'an's novel *Water Margin*. In Wei's play, Pan is presented as a pitiable figure, an innocent woman who becomes degenerate due to the manipulation, trickery, and wickedness of the people around her. To a large extent, she is a victim of feudal society, and the sympathetic tone of the play echoes the awakening consciousness and the rising social status of women in modern China, allowing the adaptation to address contemporary problems.

Inspired by Brecht, the theatre is now employed to fulfill several social functions in China. Zuolin Huang's plays are interventionist rather than merely entertaining. His *The living newspaper of the war of resistance against the U.S. and aid to Korea*, *Eight red flags are fluttering*, and *Xin changzheng jiaoxiang shi* (The symphonic poem of the new long march, 1978) uphold the socialist cause in China and address contemporary history and politics. Another disciple of Brecht, Xingjian Gao, echoes Brecht's emphasis on the critical judgments of theatergoers. Where Brecht used the alienation effect to inspire socially critical attitudes in his audience, Gao uses irony, humor, and absurdity to achieve a similar goal of using the theatre to explore profound social and philosophical issues. In his most successful experimental play, *Chezhan* (Bus stop, 1983), eight characters of different ages wait futilely for the bus to come at a bus stop on the outskirts of town for more than a year. These people are from different paths of life, and no one ever leaves, even though the bus never

³² Brecht (1974, p. 23).

appears or cares to stop. The absurdity in the play is pregnant with meanings. Like *Waiting for Godot*, which it resembles, this play is capable of being interpreted from multiple perspectives.

Brecht's theory provided support and legitimacy for Chinese playwrights and directors who sought to revolutionize traditional Chinese dramaturgy. In the New Era, Chinese theatre began to introduce formal innovations with renewed zest, allowing for more diversified theatrical practices. Besides entertaining people, the theatre is now also used to explore politics, education, and philosophy. Playwrights such as Xingjian Gao apply new techniques, such as narration, to their works. Inspired by Brecht's use of narration, many of Gao's characters also serve as narrators; they sometimes become "alienated" from their roles in the play in order to make comments on certain topics, to criticize other characters, or to evaluate their own performance. Gao's works are further noted for their discussions of existential dilemmas, moral issues, and political events. His "polyphonic" theatre is a more radical formal innovation. In plays such as *Bus stop* and *Yeren* (Wild man, 1985), the actors are assigned different sections of the stage, and several different stories take place simultaneously. The voices of the actors are confused, indistinct, or even contradictory to each other, and the audience cannot hear them all clearly. Without endorsing or highlighting any single voice, this "polyphonic" performance not only helps to illustrate the complexity of society, but also makes possible the coexistence of several different themes. Minglun Wei's theatre of the absurd is also a successful synthesis of Western and Chinese theatrical traditions. In *Pan Jintian: The history of a fallen woman*, characters from different eras and countries such as Anna Karenina, Jia Baoyu (the main character of the *Dream of the red chamber*) and Wu Zetian (an empress during the Tang dynasty) all appear in the same play. This "absurd" mixing-together of characters adds historical density and social width to the story, allowing for reflections on the status, fate, and desires of women throughout history and literature, and endowing the play with universal significance.

Brecht's theories have also allowed other factors that had previously been of minor importance in traditional Chinese theatre, such as the status of the directors and the use of lighting and stage settings, to gain prominence in modern drama. His dramatic approaches have become important resources for modern Chinese theatre, and his thoughts have inspired generations of playwrights, directors, and scholars. Instead of being a mere "echo," a "reverberation," or a "recreation" in Benjamin's sense, the "afterlife" of Brecht is not only manifested in the numerous translations, adaptations, and responses to his works in the academia, but also in numerous contemporary creative works. Though some have claimed that Chinese drama has forgotten or ignored Brecht in recent years, I would argue that, thanks to his dramaturgical theories and experimental theatrical forms, many Chinese playwrights, directors, and actors are, essentially, "Brechtians" even if they are not aware of it. Finally, the mutual influence between Brecht and Chinese dramaturgy exemplifies the effects of dramatic works circulating beyond national boundaries, allowing a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness, mechanisms, and effects of world drama that have become reality in the modern globalized world.

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