From Classical Art to Modern Drama: A Study of *Thunderstorm* from the Perspective of Art History

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Abstract. This paper conducts an art-historical research on Cao Yu's *Thunderstorm*, focusing on the integration of traditional Chinese theatrical aesthetics and Western dramatic writing methods. Through close reading and cross-text artistic comparison, this study discovers that *Thunderstorm* serves as a pivotal bridge connecting ancient Chinese opera and modern Chinese spoken drama. It successfully completes the localized transformation of Western tragic structures and promotes the modernization of traditional Chinese stage art. The research summarizes the cross-cultural integration rules of Chinese and Western stage art, which offers theoretical references for the creation of contemporary Chinese cross-cultural drama.

Keywords: *Thunderstorm*, localization, tragic aesthetics, Cao Yu.

1. Introduction

At the beginning of the 20th century, with the great fusion of Chinese and Western thought and culture, as well as the wave of artistic and cultural change in ancient and modern times, modern Chinese drama began to emerge. It is a new form of Chinese opera that has also absorbed many dramatic forms and techniques from the West, incorporating these elements selectively and adapting them to Chinese conditions. As a typical work from this period, *Thunderstorm* is a landmark in the development of modern Chinese drama and can be used as an example to explore how to integrate classical art with Western dramatic art and how classical art has been transformed into modern art.

Why was *Thunderstorm* chosen from all the plays to be the representative work of this transition period? What parts of classical art and Western dramatic ideas are included in *Thunderstorm*, and how are they connected? These are the main problems this paper will discuss. *Thunderstorm* is set against the background of the Zhou family and examines the conflict between traditional Chinese ethics and new culture in modern times. It is the embodiment of the social ethic of "family and state as one" and the core of tragic aesthetics in Chinese classical art, and at the same time, it also incorporates the concept of fate from ancient Greek tragedy and the spirit of social criticism characteristic of Ibsen. Therefore, it is a case of the localisation and adaptation of Western thought.

Thunderstorm is an example of the integration of traditional Chinese art and Western artistic elements, which shows how the style of modern Chinese art has changed. Through a systematic analysis of *Thunderstorm*, this study hopes to trace the development of Chinese dramatic art from the classical period to the present day, gain a deep understanding of the significant role that cross-cultural integration has played in the development of art, provide ideas for the future development of dramatic art, and reveal the profound meaning of *Thunderstorm* in the background of modern development.

Thunderstorm is the subject of this paper, and both a review of literature and a comparison will be used. Building upon the theoretical foundation of "the spirit of ancient Chinese literature and art", "the inheritance and development of local culture in modern drama", and "the integration of foreign dramatic traditions", numerous contents have been examined through all sorts of analyses, such as character construction, tragic beauty, the conflict between old and new social ideals, and changes in narration methods. It can be seen that *Thunderstorm* has had some historical achievements and cultural value in the development of modern dramatic literature; at the same time, it acts as a connecting path between the past and present of modern drama and faces many current issues.

Different from conventional literary text analysis, this paper adopts the research paradigm of stage art history. It focuses on the evolution of Chinese and Western stage narrative, tragic character

modeling and stage aesthetic systems, and places the artistic creation of Thunderstorm into the overall development context of Chinese modern stage art, so as to clarify its historical status in the transformation of Chinese theatrical art.

2. The Manifestation of the Artistic Spirit of Ancient China in Modern and Contemporary Society

2.1. The Legacy of the Tragic Spirit

Classical Chinese art has always contained a tragic consciousness of "compassion for heaven and pity for humanity", as shown in the "sorrowful but not maudlin" tone of the Book of Songs, the "concern for the nation and the people" in Li Sao, and the "joys and sorrows, partings and reunions" of Yuan drama; thus, tragedy has continuously carried reflections on the nation, family and human nature. *Thunderstorm* continues this traditional idea: The emotional entanglements and conflicting duties of the Zhou family compound are not only simple domestic conflicts but also an unavoidable tragedy caused by the clash of old and new ideologies in the face of the tide of social progress [1]. Thirty years ago, in order to marry a rich young woman of the same social class, Zhou Puyuan expelled Shi Ping, who was pregnant with Lu Dahai, from their home on New Year's Eve and oppressed women of the lower classes with feudal rituals and ideas of social status; under the oppressive weight of patriarchy, Zhou Ping desires to break free from his bonds with Fan Yi but is too timid to bear the responsibility, thus meeting his own ruin by choosing between moral duty and personal desire; Fan Yi, constrained in a relationship that is "neither mother nor lover", rebels against the family order through extraordinary means; Lu Dahai, a member of the working class, confronts the bourgeoisie directly and, in the face of oppression, takes up the fight [2]. The fate of these characters is in line with the spiritual idea of "the impermanence of the heavenly way" in classical tragedy and shows a sad picture of "fate playing tricks" [3]. The reason for the tension in fate is primarily due to the binary opposition system used by Cao Yu in his plays, such as class conflict, the dilemma of moral choice, and the clash of old and new ideas. These contrasts are to heighten the sense of conflict in a play and also explore ideas about misfortune [4].

2.2. Family Ethics and Social Criticism

Classical Chinese art is based on the idea of "the family and the state being one", so family conflicts often take on the character of social problems. *Thunderstorm*s are also like that. In the background of the transition from the old to the new society, this play shows the decline of a feudal clan and links internal family power struggles, intergenerational conflicts, and emotional entanglement with the class antagonism and ideological conflict between the old and new ideas in modern China. The sadness of the Zhou family is not just a family story; it is also a symbol for all of "Old China". Zhou Puyuan is both a feudal patriarch and a capitalist. At home, he exercises patriarchal control over his wife and children through the declaration, "I am the master of this household; no one may defy me," and suppresses strikes in his business by shooting workers and withholding wages; thus, the hierarchical oppression in the family is extended to social class exploitation. Zhou Chong, having received modern education, aspired to an egalitarian society where "schools are established for miners," but his ideals were crushed under the weight of his father's patriarchal authority [1]; this literary device of "using the family to symbolize the nation" is also evident in traditional Chinese operas such as *The Injustice Done to Dou E* and *The Orphan of Zhao*.

2.3. The Style of Combining Colloquial Language and Poetic Expression

Traditional Chinese art aims for elegance and grace; modern dramatic art, on the other hand, is more about ordinary language that is closer to life and sincere emotion [5]. *Thunderstorm* uses a lot of colloquial language in the characters' dialogue to make the dramatic expression more in line with real life and to give the characters more life. For instance, when Lu Shiping sees Zhou Ping hit Lu

Dahai, she blurts out, "You're Ping... why are you doing that to my son?" This line shows that Lu Shiping wants to be acknowledged as a mother by Zhou Ping; it also conforms to the language habits of working-class women and is a clear and vivid expression of the character's emotions in that situation [1]. At the same time, Cao Yu's dialogue is full of poetic expressions. Fan Yi's words, "It's too hot and stuffy - I can't live like this anymore", show her repressed feelings and desire for freedom; they are written in a colloquial style but also contain poetic beauty [1]. This way of writing has incorporated the elements of vernacular language and poetry to give the dialogue in *Thunderstorm* a simple yet literary charm, thus reaching many readers' hearts.

3. Innovative Development of Modern Drama in *Thunderstorm*

3.1. Ideological Awakening of Characters

Thunderstorm is not a typical character in traditional Chinese art, and thus does not fit the mold; it shows us a group of people with changing ideals who dare to defy the odds, such as Fan Yi. Fan Yi is a woman who has been raised in the old-fashioned way and received modern education but is still bound by feudal concepts. Her ideological awakening is shown by her defiance of the feudal patriarchal privileges represented by Zhou Puyuan, and in her words, she directly scolds him: "Do you think I am willing to be your ornament and be controlled at your whim?" "I am a person; I have my own feelings!" Her frank rebellion breaks the social rules of "Three Obediences and Four Virtues" that feudal society imposed on women, and in her actions, she ignores the concept of a "modest wife", falls in love with Zhou Ping, and tries to leave the Zhou family. In the face of the harshness of her life, she yearns for love, freedom and dignity out of desperation and thus shows the first glimmer of modern Chinese women's consciousness [6].

3.2. The Constant Clash Between Old and New Ideologies

Cao Yu wrote during a period when China was a semi-colonial, anti-feudal society, and reflected the characteristics of that time in his works. First, this conflict is shown by the awakening of women's consciousness and their rebellion against feudal patriarchy. As an "educated woman of the old era", Fan Yi is both in line with the progressive Western idea of freedom and equality and adheres to the traditional discipline and dependence system. She is brave enough to refuse Zhou Puyuan's forced medication and "confinement to the upper floor", using the ideology of the New Woman to rebel against feudal patriarchy. At the same time, she is forced to place her hopes on Zhou Ping and reveals that she is deeply dependent on men in her very being. This struggle to be free from restrictions but also constrained by old ideas is exactly the conflict of the old and new ideologies in this special situation. Lu Dahai shouts the slogan, "We will go on strike; we will reclaim our hard-earned wages," and employs class struggle to resist Zhou Puyuan's capitalist oppression; this shows that the working class has begun to feel this oppression. Zhou Puyuan's firing and using of workers are also in line with the interests of feudal capitalism [7]. The ideological conflict of the characters is based on the history of the early 20th century; at that time, new ideas were attempting to dispel the darkness, but old ideas were still quietly influencing people. This is why there has been conflict in the ideologies.

3.3. Deepening of Social Criticism

Cao Yu's moral criticism does not conform to the traditional idea in Chinese society of "punishing evil and rewarding good", and is rather modern and deep. *Thunderstorm* is no longer blamed on "evil people"; rather, it is a criticism of the entire feudal system of social ethics. Zhou Puyuan's cruelty is not due to bad character but rather a result of the feudal patriarchal system and capitalist exploitation. From an early age, he was taught that "family background is everything", and out of love for his family, he gave up other ways of life; as a capitalist later on, he also used a capitalist mindset to exploit the workers. Fan Yi's madness is not inborn but a fierce revolt resulting from the moral oppression of the feudal era. To correct the problems in society, this work does not fall under the scope of family ethics and becomes a work of literature that is relevant today.

3.4. Localization of Western Dramatic Art

Thunderstorm is an artistic work based on the style of Western dramas and takes local conditions as its background. Cao Yu is structurally based on the "three unities" of ancient Greek tragedy; that is to say, the story takes place in the Zhou Mansion, and all the events occur on the same day in one place to make the plot easier to follow [8]. For instance, the development of the plot is Shi Ping's arrival, Lu Dahai's negotiation and Fan Yi's resistance; all take place at the same time and in the same place. In terms of narrative, the play carries forward the critical spirit of Ibsen's social problem plays and makes the criticism of social institutions more appealing to audiences. Lu Dahai and Zhou Puyuan have talked about it, and the real reason for the workers' shooting and wage deduction has been disclosed; in terms of themes, it combines the Western concept of "fate" from tragic novels with the traditional Chinese view of "cause and effect" [9]. The Western "concept of fate" is that of an unavoidable destiny, and characters cannot avoid their fate; for example, although Shi Ping clearly wanted to break away from the Zhou family, thirty years later, she and her children were all forced to return to the Zhou house. Zhou Puyuan's wrongdoings thirty years ago have had a direct impact on his life and the lives of his family and loved ones; this is a characteristic feature of the Chinese concept of cause and effect. Together, they can have the natural flow of Western narration and also meet the aesthetic requirements of the Chinese public.

Cao Yu drew on the "three unities" structure of ancient Greek tragedy, a classic stage art norm in Western art history. Unlike the virtual scattered stage of traditional Chinese opera, all plots of Thunderstorm take place in the Zhou Mansion within one day, absorbing the spatial narrative logic of Western tragedy. Meanwhile, he retained the emotional expression logic of Chinese opera, replacing Western soliloquies with character monologues, realizing the localized adaptation of Western stage art.

4. *Thunderstorms* in the History of Art

4.1. The Foundation of the Development of Chinese Drama

Thunderstorm is an excellent representative work of modern Chinese drama and has set an artistic standard for contemporary spoken drama. In terms of the creation of text, it developed many-faceted characters, built a whole story structure, and expressed profound ideas. Cao Yu created rich and profound characters through the "*Thunderstorm*-like" temperament of Fan Yi, hypocrisy in Zhou Puyuan and suffering in Shi Ping; in terms of stage effects, the image of a "*Thunderstorm*" has been frequently used to create a heavy atmosphere and has provided an excellent reference for contemporary Chinese theatre. *Thunderstorm* allowed modern Chinese drama to break away from the imitation of classical Chinese and Western modern drama, form its own unique traits of independent development, and lay the foundation for the development of modern Chinese dramatic literature.

4.2. Implications and Significance for Contemporary Dramatic Creation

New Development of *Thunderstorm* can provide new ideas and inspiration for modern theatre. In the background of globalisation, Chinese theatre needs to be in line with the spirit of Chinese culture, present local culture, inherit the spiritual charm and aesthetic system of classical Chinese art, and at the same time, incorporate Western theatrical expressions and create innovations through adaptation [10]. At the same time, one should keep up with the changes of the times, focus on exploration of reality and human nature, and carry forward and promote the essence of traditional Chinese culture. Teahouse is a typical representative work of *Thunderstorm*, which inherits the critical spirit of the work to use the family to symbolize the nation and shows changes in Chinese society through the rise and fall of the Yutai Teahouse. This is exactly the precious inheritance *Thunderstorm* has left for the next generation.

From the perspective of art history, Thunderstorm has greatly promoted the reform of Chinese modern stage art. Its fixed indoor realistic stage design breaks the virtual stage setting of traditional

Chinese opera, forming a realistic stage aesthetic system combining Chinese and Western styles. This stage creation mode has influenced the stage art design of Chinese modern spoken drama for decades, and has become a typical sample of the integration of Chinese and Western stage art in the history of Chinese modern art

5. Conclusions

A close reading and comparison of *Thunderstorm* are carried out in this paper. The following are the results: *Thunderstorm* is a characteristic of the development of modern Chinese drama; it inherits the tragic spirit and ethical traditions of classical Chinese art, and at the same time achieves innovation in character creation and artistic form. *Thunderstorm* uses a family tragedy to show social problems and places the conflict of old and new ideologies and class contradictions on the same stage. By applying Western drama to a local situation, it has created a work of art that is in the style of China but has modern elements. Cao Yu uses the structure of binary opposition to tell the story of a detailed grudge among three generations of the Wu family, portrays well-drawn characters that reflect the social problems at that time, and also shows how people's lives are affected by such circumstances. The play was one of the first in the development of modern Chinese drama and also provided a reference for subsequent creative works. It can also be used as a basis for further study and analysis of related problems in contemporary studies on traditional culture and modern life. In the future, research may be conducted in the following directions: On the one hand, it is possible to explore the dissemination of "*Thunderstorm*" in different times and cultures to uncover its cross-cultural and trans-generational artistic vitality; On the other hand, it can be examined what lessons are contained in the artistic heritage of "*Thunderstorm*" for contemporary dramatic creation and the innovative development of traditional culture, ensuring that this classic work is fully explored and passed down in the new era.

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