



On the Acceptance of Western Expressionism in Chinese Drama in the Early 20th Century—Take the Early Plays of Guo Moruo, Hong Shen and Cao Yu as Examples

Yonghao Hong

School of Liberal Arts, Nanjing University, Nanjing, Jiangsu, China.

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***Corresponding author:** Yonghao Hong, School of Liberal Arts, Nanjing University, Nanjing, Jiangsu, China.

Abstract

Expressionism is a dramatic and artistic movement that rose in Europe from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century, and its influence spread rapidly all over the world. Influenced by the spirit of the May 4th movement, Chinese playwrights in the early 20th century began to try to introduce new dramatic styles and artistic forms in the face of the shackles of traditional ideas. This innovative spirit provides the soil for Chinese drama to accept Western expressionism. Guo Moruo, Hong Shen, and Cao Yu have an important influence on the history of Chinese drama. At the same time, their early plays have typical characteristics of expressionism, which can represent the acceptance of expressionism at each stage in China. The acceptance process can be roughly divided into four stages: initial stage, contact and enlightenment, experiment and innovation, and influence expansion. However, influenced by war factors, the influence of expressionism on Chinese drama has been greatly weakened since the 1940s.

Keywords

Expressionism, Chinese Drama, Influence and Acceptance

1. The birth of Western expressionism and its spread in China in the early 20th century

The rise of Western expressionism originated in the field of fine arts. In 1850, an article written by Anonymous was published in the newspaper of Tate's Edinburgh magazine, which first proposed the term "Expressionism" in art. In 1917, German expressionist writer Schmidt wrote "Expressionism in Literary Creation", which systematically explained the origin, ideas, and techniques of Expressionism. In his opinion, in the plot, he broke the traditional dramatization; Structurally, it breaks the traditional timeline and creates a unique illusion atmosphere by inserting dreams. At the same time, the playwright will add his own strong subjective emotions in his creation, and pass this strong emotion to the audience through the characters in the play.

This trend of Expressionism in literature spread in China at the beginning of the 20th century. Oriental Magazine was the first to translate and introduce expressionist thoughts and works. It systematically introduced the dramas of German expressionist writers such as Strindberg, Kaiser, and Wedkin, which also provided advanced playwrights in the period of the May 4th movement with a reference way to promote the thought of "patriotism, progress, democracy, and science".

With the development of the times, the trend of expressionism gradually declined in Germany in the 1920s. At this time, the American playwright O'Neill further developed expressionism in the United States, which made expressionism obtain new vitality. His reference and development of expressionism is mainly reflected in the exploration

of people's inner world and the analysis of subconsciousness, to show social problems and social alienation of people.

The earliest introduction of O'Neill's plays in China can be traced back to 1922. In May, Shen Yanbing introduced O'Neill for the first time in the novel *Monthly*, which can be regarded as a preliminary study of O'Neill's plays and thoughts by Chinese writers. However, the upsurge in the study of O'Neill's drama really rose in the 1930s, when Hong Shen, wise, Yuan Changying, and others began to translate O'Neill's drama in large quantities. Meanwhile, Gu Zhongyi's playwright O'Neill in 1934 and Xiao Qian's O'Neill and his drama in 1935 all made a systematic and in-depth discussion and interpretation of O'Neill's playwrighting techniques and ideas.

But soon, with the onset of the civil war and the outbreak of the war of resistance against Japan, the surge of research in the 1930s subsided. Realistic drama works reflecting the spirit of the war of resistance and encouraging people to fight bravely gradually took over the dominant position. This also signified the waning influence of expressionism on early Chinese drama.

2. The preliminary attempt of Chinese drama on expressionism theory

Guo Moruo said, "I made a work of the Tangdi Flower... The rebirth of the goddess, Xiang Lei, and later the Second Son of the Lonely Eamboo Emperor... Especially the performance of the fragmentation of the Expressionists, in my mind of fragmentation, I really got its nourishment" (Guo Moruo, 1992). The characteristics of "Expressionism" in the middle can be seen in his plays of this period: "Combine the national aesthetic taste and appreciation habits to better play the social function of literature" (Ma Yimin, 2023).

In the play "Tangdi Flower" written by Guo Moruo in 1920, the expressionism embodied in it is not embodied in form, that is, it is not the addition of dream scenes, but the subjective emotions of Guo Moruo are integrated into the play. On the one hand, he reshapes historical figures. It is a prominent feature that distinguishes Nie Ying and Nie Zheng from historical facts, which is another important reason why they have become expressionist dramas. In this play, Nie Ying is portrayed as a female hero who is different from history and has a spirit of national righteousness and a rebellious spirit.

Nie Zheng Sister, your lyrics are very masculine. If your mother is here, she will be angry.

Nie Ying When my mother is here, she always hopes that we can enjoy real happiness in life. I think at the moment, all the sisters and brothers in the world are in deep water. If we can save them, it is the supreme happiness of life to sacrifice their bodies, so you go to Puyang tonight. I know how much sacrifice there will be in the future, but I am very happy to see you off. I think no sacrifice, no love; no love, no happiness (Yang Fang, 2007)!

From the content of the dialogue, Guo Moruo not only reshaped his image but also reflected another aspect of expressionist factors: integrating his own spirit into the characters in the play and showing it through Nie Ying. The handling of this dialogue in the play is, on the one hand, the externalization of the characters' hearts, and on the other hand, the catharsis of their subjective emotions: Nie Ying's words convey Guo Moruo's idea that the broad masses of people are not afraid of sacrifice to fight against feudalism and oppression.

Not only the Tangdi Flower but also the play of Wang Zhaojun created by Guo Moruo in 1923 also reflects expressionist factors. Wang Zhaojun's resistance to the Yuan emperor's intention to marry the Huns was a transformative adaptation to show the Chinese people's resistance to the old rulers and feudal ideology. In addition, in the play, Guo Moruo further exaggerates the "abnormal" image of emperor yuan of the Han Dynasty: he hangs the portrait of Wang Zhaojun on the wall and puts Mao Yanshou's body beside the table. Such treatment intentionally made the emperor of Han Yuan, as the representative of feudalism, alienate into a madman, and this alienation also reflected the anti-imperialist and anti-feudal spirit of the May 4th movement.

There are also plays such as Xiang Lei, Zhuowenjun, and The Rebirth of the Goddess, which all have images of historical figures with extraordinary bearing and the expression of passionate language containing the author's spirit. These are also the embodiment of integrating historical figures into the modern atmosphere and conveying modern values and concepts.

It can be seen that in Guo Moruo's plays during this period, mainly through the author's adaptation of historical figures, and in the process of adaptation, the "victory of truth" in "Using perceptual images to show the truth of the characters' inner hearts or to show the victory of eternal truth." Chen Jianchang (2009) advocated that expressionism was integrated. The so-called truth here is anti-imperialist and anti-feudal, and the liberation of the people. In addition, from the perspective of the expressionist factors shown in its drama characteristics, Chinese drama at this time only explored some of the expressionist factors, and more artistic techniques were still not widely used in drama creation.

3. The initial establishment of Chinese expressionist drama

Hong Shen's "King of Zhao" published in *Oriental Magazine* in 1923 is known as China's first expressionist play. Compared with the dramas with expressionism created by previous dramatists, this play undoubtedly has made great progress and tends to mature.

This play is no different from O'Neill's *King Jones*, and its premiere in China was a failure, as put forward in his article "During the performance the night before yesterday, the audience did not understand what the play said, and even thought that the person who wrote the play was mentally ill" (Hong Shen, 1959). However, from the use of expressionism, this play is successful.

First, the drama is based on the perspective of Chinese reality, which reflects that the scuffle between warlords at that time brought great damage to the interests of the people and soldiers at the lower levels. This in itself is the display of reality promoted by expressionism, which can be said to be the nationalization of Expressionism.

Second, it fully demonstrates the expressionist characteristic of "Showing subjective feelings". In Zhao Da's hallucinations, there have been such phenomena as robbing money from him when he buried his injuries, the people who died from the persecution of the war, the land occupied by the landlords and beaten but unable to revenge, and being lured to gamble and lose all his money and only to join the army, which not only enhanced the drama of the whole play but also did not scatter the script.

Third, the three-dimensional character image. The general theatrical defect caused by the "three unifications" is the simplification of the characters' character, but Zhao DA in *The King of Zhao* has the characteristic of "typification". "Before the appearance of King Zhao, the early modern drama in China had never created such a typical character with a complex character and vivid image as 'King Zhao'" (Fan Fangjun, 2003). He has such evils as robbing, cheating, and burying injuries alive, as well as his loyalty to his superiors and his guilt for doing evil to himself. But his evil was not innate. He was also a dutiful farmer but was forced by landlords and colonists to lose his land, he was cheated when gambling as a soldier, and his money was lost. Under the rendering of the environment, Zhao's defecate has become a victim of the times. It can be said that King Zhao not only gathered the experiences of many people at that time but also was independent of pure good or evil.

The Chinese dramas after Hong Shen, including Bai Wei's "LinLi" and Gao Changhong's "A Mysterious Tragedy", all contain the color of Expressionism. For example, in Gao Changhong's mysterious tragedy, the characters have no names but are replaced by A, B, C, D, E, and a farmer, which in itself is the performance of character typology in expressionism.

It can be said that Hongshen's "King of Zhao" played an important role in the introduction of Chinese early expressionism Drama: on the one hand, it explored the possibility of the development of Chinese drama to expressionism, on the other hand, it proved that the presentation of expressionism could be drawn from Chinese reality for later Playwrights. In addition, "Hongshen also has quite a few works that show his experimental and innovative spirit" (Liu Wenya, 2022).

4. The maturity of Chinese expressionist drama

In the 1920s, although Chinese playwrights made explorative attempts at expressionism drama, these attempts did not achieve great success. One is the drama represented by Guo Moruo. Although it can be seen from his words that it is indeed influenced by "Expressionism", there is no obvious expressionism factor in its early drama. It can be said that it only has some colors of Expressionism. Second, although Hongshen, gaochanghong, and other dramas later had obvious expressionist characteristics, they were still in the stage of imitating Western expressionist dramas with "similar appearance", and did not succeed in commercial performance, nor was it understood by the Chinese public at that time. However, it was not until the emergence of Cao Yu in the 1930s that the expressionist drama was brought to maturity.

Since the 1930s, the influence of O'Neill's dramatic works in China has expanded, "making modern Chinese drama have the basic characteristics of Expressionism" (Lü Zhou-ju, 2019). In fact, it is true.

Expressionism is fully integrated in his play *Wilderness*: "Takes the alienated natural space and alienated living space as the main drama space, and completes the presentation of primitive life consciousness in the absurd consciousness and real space" (Zhu Shenzhen, 2023).

This is especially true in Act Three. After the *Revenge of Qiu Hu*, there is no pleasure of revenge. Instead, it is "punishment" in the original power. In the black forest, he saw Jiao Daxing's ghost following all the way, his family

was persecuted, and the king of hell and Jiao became birds of a feather. At the same time, under the continuous influence of drums, wind, and bird calls, Qiu Hu fell into a dilemma of illusion and finally chose to commit suicide. This is very similar to Emperor Jones, but looking at the whole play, from the image creation, the creation of tragic atmosphere, to the theme of "crime and punishment" between the display of primitive vitality and oppression and revenge, it can be said that Cao Yu integrated his subjective emotions into a poem and integrated it into the play.

The reference to Expressionism in this play is no longer a simple plot structure but in the performance of the conflict of primitive emotions. It is Expressionism as a carrier to show the psychological and spiritual state of Qiu Hu, which can be regarded as both "spirit similarity" and "shape similarity". At the same time, Cao Yu's play "The Wilderness" also achieved great success in performance. Its first performance was forced to stop because of the outbreak of the Songhu battle, and its second public performance in the Xindian theater in 1939, "The audience came to watch in the rain, and the venue was full" (Guang Mingming, 2004). This is in sharp contrast to the theater performance of the king of Zhao.

The great success of Cao Yu's plays, on the one hand, showed China's acceptance of expressionism at that time, on the other hand, promoted the development of dramas containing expressionism. During this period, Xu Xu created dramas such as "Ghost" and "History of Women"; and Chen Chuhuai's "The Infatuator of the Skeleton", in which the typology of character design and the presentation of the poet's complex heart before his death, all use expressionist techniques. However, it is worth mentioning that the drama of this period was not purely expressionist drama, but a "hybrid" of various modernist factors, but expressionist factors accounted for a large proportion.

In the process of maturing, due to the rise of the Second World War, the Chinese left-wing Writers' Union, which took realism as its creation principle, became the mainstream of literary schools. "Its activities and propositions virtually limited the audience's appreciation of the field of vision to the scope of realistic drama" (Chen Dahong, 2021). The kind of realistic drama works that publicized "anti-aggression" rose on a large scale in the 1940s, So the expressionist drama creation declined.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, the acceptance of Western expressionism in Chinese drama in the early 20th century is a gradual process. It can be divided into four stages.

The first is the initial stage. In the early stage of Chinese drama, especially in the early 1920s, the abstract style and dramatic form of Western expressionism were very different from the traditional concept, so it was not completely used for reference in reception, but the expressionist factors could be found in some aspects.

Second, contact and enlightenment. In the early 1920s, some Chinese Dramatists began to contact and understand the theories and works of Western expressionism. By reading Western drama literature, translated works, and reports of foreign performances, they gradually learned more about Western expressionism and tried to introduce it into Chinese drama.

Third, experiment and innovation. In the late 1920s, Chinese drama gradually began to accept the influence of Western expressionism and carried out a series of experiments and innovations in practice.

Fourth, the expansion of influence. In the late 1930s, more and more dramatists and audiences began to accept and appreciate the influence of Western expressionism. This influence has gradually expanded in the creation and performance of Chinese drama.

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