



# Philosophical Thinking on Chinese Drama

Tian Benxiang\*

**Abstract:** There is a profound and close relationship between philosophy and drama. All great writers have a philosophical vision and fantasy of one kind or another. As Wang Guowei said, "*A Dream of Red Mansions* is universally acclaimed as a philosophical and literary work." However, Chinese drama has always been plagued by pragmatism and instrumentalism, and often finds itself caught in the trap of philosophical poverty when it comes to dramatic writing and theoretical criticism related to drama. Friedrich Engels once said, "The immense depth of thought and the historical content are perfectly integrated with the vividness and richness of Shakespearean plots." This remains the highest philosophical standards we are going to reach in dramatic writing.

**Keywords:** pragmatism; philosophical poverty; philosophical implication

The 110th anniversary of Chinese drama has inspired my tentative philosophical thinking about it. I am not a philosopher, but I do have impulse to think philosophically. I remember that I wrote "Philosophical Reflections on the History of Literature" when, in 1991, Professor Wang Furen invited me to write a paper on the history of modern Chinese literature (Tian, 1991). I have always felt that philosophy can remove the constraints of a purely professional perspective for me and enable me to surpass myself, to think, and to gain more awareness.

I would like to summarize my philosophical thinking on Chinese drama in three categories: 1) The philosophical troubles facing Chinese drama; 2) The close relationship between philosophy and drama; 3) The philosophical poverty of Chinese drama.

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\* Tian Benxiang, professor, Chinese National Academy of Arts.

For more than a century, a philosophical problem, namely instrumentalism and pragmatism, has been driving, restricting, and troubling Chinese drama. The statement that this is a facilitator of Chinese drama is attested to by history and reality. It is truly an inhibiting factor when it comes to what restricts the development of Chinese drama and to say that it troubles and limits the thinking and soul of those involved in, and those regulating, Chinese drama.

It is undeniable that this problem is a driving force behind Chinese drama. Chinese revolutionaries first embraced literary drama because they intended to use it to help save the country and the people. During the modern drama period, Tian Miaosheng (1908) put it very clearly, “The introduction of foreign ideology is of primary importance if we are to save our country. The introduction of foreign ideology ... cannot be done without drama.” Therefore, modern drama aimed to coordinate with democratic & national revolution to launch an all-out offensive against the corrupt monarchy and to lodge an angry protest against invading foreign powers. The Tianzhi faction used modern drama to inspire the revolution.

Leaders of the May Fourth New Literature Movement such as Hu Shi advocated new plays including Ibsen’s drama, using them as a carrier of new ideas and a tool for disseminating them. According to Ouyang Yuqian (1918), drama is “The voice of thought.” Hong Shen (1929) went a step further and believed that, “Modern drama is important and valuable in the sense that it reflects ideology.”

In the 1930s, “proletarian” drama emerged from the left-wing drama advocated by Tian Han and Xia Yan. Obviously, drama was used as a tool

in the class struggle. During the Chinese People’s War of Resistance against Japanese aggression, drama was called on to serve the great cause of fighting off the Japanese invaders, playing a truly inspiring role. The need for drama was not at all due to the human instinct for entertainment. The purpose of those who took an interest in Western drama and brought it home was to rectify social evils and malpractice when China was at the historic juncture of life and death. When drama was called on to serve politics, its role as a pragmatic tool was pushed to the extreme. Once the revolution succeeded, drama was reduced to the “Schillerism” criticized by Marx as being merely a horn, and, “Anyway you must have it orientated around Shakespeare” (Marx, 1960). Drama became an out of reach luxury.

Pragmatism and instrumentalism have become the driving force behind Chinese drama while creating a profound uneasiness that seems difficult to resolve. Yet no solution seems to exist. It seems that this uneasiness is escalating. Like an invisible hand, pragmatism and instrumentalism adopt a new posture, shout a new slogan, and appear in a new way. Recently, I have heard some dramatists mention the dilemma confronting drama and their own mental distress. Some critics also, without reservation, talked about the various troubles facing Chinese drama, which are fundamentally the interference from pragmatism. However, we see that it continues to drive and impede the development of Chinese drama today and throw the ones involved in drama into utter confusion. It seems that this philosophy haunts us like a ghost.

However, neither absolute and simplistic assertions about pragmatism and instrumentalism nor either-or conclusions for the complex situation it has caused are the solution to the problem. Complexity of the situation often requires us to think dialectically. Pragmatism

and instrumentalism are deeply entrenched, and they relate to what Li Zehou calls “practical rational philosophy.” However, Li Zehou (1985) put forward the concept of practicality and rationality to embody the “wisdom of China.” It does have advantages, but it also has shortcomings that cannot to be ignored (pp. 295-322). Chinese dramatists did manifest wisdom when they embraced, applied, and transformed Western drama. But traditional thinking has prevented us from further reconstructing and developing drama. The problem is that this mode of thinking is almost unconsciously etched on the soul of Chinese dramatists and China’s cultural managements, and in some sense even became a collective automatic behavior. If you see this, you will understand that a slogan or measure alone is by no means enough to infuse Marxist philosophy into Chinese drama. It is extremely important to recognize that this is a long-term arduous task.

At present, pragmatism has a major tendency towards simplification. Usefulness almost became the only criterion for judgment, which is an extremely harmful utilitarian philosophy. In the sphere of drama, this has been found in dramatic writing, criticism, and theory. It is noteworthy that philosophical studies in recent years have been eager to interpret “uselessness”, which goes against the trend. This trend is continuing not only in China, but also across the globe. Abraham Flexner, former president of the Princeton Institute of Advanced Studies in the United States, published “The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge,” in which he cited substantial facts to illustrate that it is this “useless” knowledge having another value that is expanding the boundaries of human cognition and promoting the liberation of the souls and spirits of generations. He said: “An overview of the history of science reveals that most of the great discoveries that ultimately prove to be of benefit to

mankind are made by scientists who are not driven by the pursuit of practicality and whose only desire is to satisfy their curiosity... I strongly urge the abolition of the concept of ‘usefulness’ and call for the liberation of the human spirit... But what is far more important than indulgence and money is that the chains that once imprisoned human thought have been shattered and people were freed to explore ideas... The overriding importance of spiritual and academic freedom... As long as human souls are purified, elevated, and satisfied by these expressions of human thought, their existence makes sense. Their existence does not depend on any explicit or implicit recognition of practicability.” Judging from the history of human sciences, literature and art, many great discoveries and literary and artistic masterpieces were made or created mostly by scientists and artists who were driven not by some “practical” goal but by a personal hobby or pursuit. Impoverished Cao Xueqin wrote *A Dream of Red Mansions*, Sima Qian compiled *The Historical Records*, Newton discovered the law of universal gravitation, Einstein formulated Relativity Theory—there are few exceptions to this.

Philosophy enables us to look at some seemingly perplexing issues from a long-term, macroscopic, tolerant, and dialectical perspective. However, as complex as the problem caused by pragmatism in the theory and practice of drama may be, we can provide philosophical interpretations until the present scenario and development of Chinese drama is fully understood. This is also a long-term task.

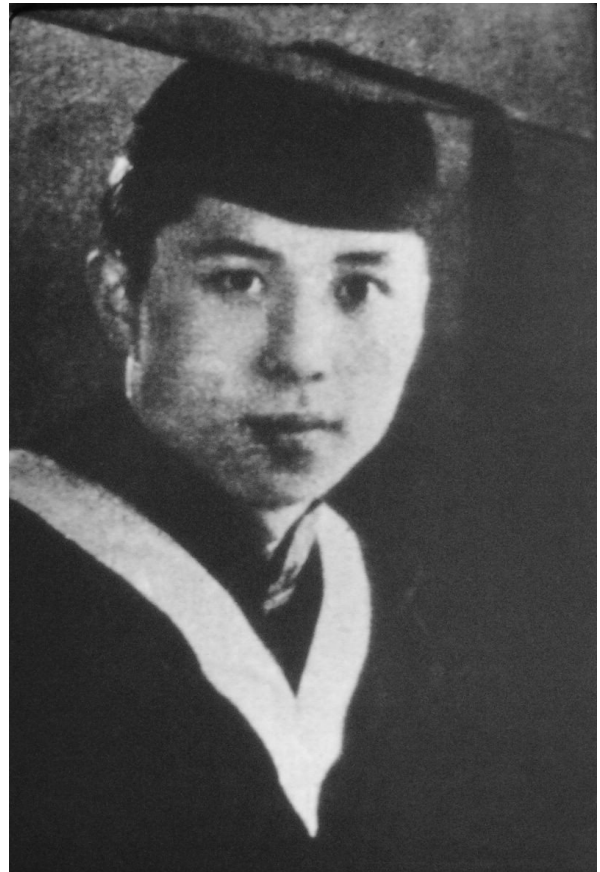
## II

The relationship between philosophy and drama is an objective reality, something that has an intrinsic root cause. We have been negligent

in this regard. Adorno's recently published *Philosophy of New Music* expounds the inter-relationships between philosophy and music, or philosophy and art, in terms of the theory and practice of music. He (2017) said, "Philosophy and art overlap on the concept of truth. The truth that a work of art gradually develops is no different from the truthfulness of philosophical concepts. The content of truth is not what an artwork denotes, but the criterion for determining whether the artwork itself is true. This variation of the content of truth in art, and only this variation, tends to accept a philosophical interpretation because it fits well with the appropriateness of a philosophical truth. Aesthetic experience must be integrated into philosophy, otherwise it will not be a true aesthetic experience."

When I wrote "On the Drama of Cao Yu", Cao Yu's preface of *Thunderstorm* and *Thunderstorm* gave me some enlightenment on the philosophical thinking about drama. He (1996) said, "*Thunderstorm* is a temptation for me. The emotions that accompany *Thunderstorm* add up to indescribable visions of the many mysteries in the universe. In my opinion, what *Thunderstorm* portrays is not causation or retribution, but the 'cruelty' of the world" (p. 7). I made some superficial interpretations based on my understanding at the time. Later, I realized more deeply that Cao Yu's preface of *Thunderstorm* and *Thunderstorm* unfolded the philosophical realm of art in front of me. *Thunderstorm* was the flame in the life of Cao Yu and the sublimation of his philosophy of life.

All great writers have a philosophical vision and fantasy of one kind or another. Wang Guowei (1997) said, "*A Dream of the Red Mansions* is universally acclaimed as both a philosophical and literary work" (p.358). This inspired me to engage in philosophical thinking on drama. In *Insights*



Cao Yu

into *A Dream of the Red Mansions*, Liu Zaifu (2008) points out that philosophy falls into two categories: rationalistic philosophy and comprehensive philosophy. The former stresses logic, analysis, and evidence, while the latter stresses intuition, association, and internal perception. The philosophy present in *A Dream of the Red Mansions* is not rationalistic, but comprehensive. It is not the construction of a concept or category, but a philosophical imprint that permeates the work" (p.210). Liu Zaifu presented a series of unique insights into the world view and philosophical connotations presented in *A Dream of the Red Mansions*.

All great works do have a philosophical point—the author's world view and philosophical

outlook, have philosophical groundwork, and raise philosophical problems, which form their philosophical realm. Shakespearean plays, for example, are popular throughout the world simply because of the charm derived from their rich philosophical implications. As Dubrovnik (1979) points out in *Light of the Dark Kingdom*, “There are many things in his scripts that can be called new discoveries. His literary activities have given common understanding a great boost. No one else had ever achieved this before, and only a few philosophers could point it out from afar. This is why Shakespeare has world-wide significance” (p.499). One can go so far as to say that every character in his works has a philosophical purport. Hamlet is precisely the embodiment of comprehensive philosophy.

The reason why Cao Yu’s works have lasting artistic significance and immense charm is that his works embody his world view, that is, the “cruelty” of the world. He adopted a unique philosophical perspective. His ability to see gold in filth and goodness in evil has led to amazing artistic discoveries. The characters in his works are classical just because, as Hegel (1962) said, “Beauty is the perceived form of ideas” (p.138). “Man is a poor animal.” is the philosophical proposition in his works. It is this seemingly mysterious sense of the universe that makes it a perspective on the world that transcends the times and reality and forms a lofty and grand world view. Cao Yu said realism means it does not have to be that realistic. Sublimation, refinement, and discovery are only possible when reality is perceived from a perspective that transcends reality.

When we look at European and US dramatic thought in modern times, we find a profound connection with philosophical thought. Realistic dramatic thought represented by Ibsen is related to Auguste Comte’s positivist philosophy. His Course

of Empirical Philosophy and Positivist Political Systems have had a profound impact on the birth of realistic literature and drama. Undoubtedly, realism is related to Nietzsche’s philosophy and Freudian theory. A powerful philosophical thought is often the source of development for literary and dramatic thought. Zhu Guangqian (1989) claimed to be a true follower of Nietzsche’s idealism (p. 285). *Psychology of Tragedy*, which he wrote in the 1930s, was a study on tragedy inspired by Nietzsche’s philosophy and Freudian theory. Rafael at the Royal College of London University in the United Kingdom holds that, “*Psychology of Tragedy* provides valuable arguments for establishing a comprehensive theory of tragedy” (Zhu, 1995. p. 209).

Chinese drama should have drawn on the philosophical perspectives that accompanied the development of Western drama. But it developed autism and kept itself within the boundaries of its own small courtyard. As a result, it lost the inclusiveness, lofty vision, and penetrating insight of philosophy.

### III

We have seen the inseparable connection between philosophy and art. Therefore, we can identify that contemporary drama and drama theory and criticism are indeed caught in the grip of philosophical poverty.

In the early days of the New Era, there was once a philosophical fever in dramatic writing. Philosophical ideas were crammed into plays, which came under immediate criticism. During the upsurge of exploration drama in the 1980s, Chinese drama burst with remarkable vitality. It is delightful to see that its development sprinted forward with a philosophical impulse—an inquiry about life, the awakening of life, and the extensive



A Scene of *Teahouse*

exploration of man and humanity. Dramatic works began to have philosophical implications. However, the moment of imminent outbreak suddenly disappeared, and a great opportunity for drama to ride on the crest of success was lost.

Gouerye's *Nirvana* is a commendable play. Gouerye, a typical tragic figure of the times and an image of profound philosophical implications, was an indicator of the emerging great opportunity. If Ah Q had a philosophical purport, then Gouerye had his—one that was etched with a profound historical paradox. Unfortunately, this was short-lived. Once lost, the ambient and mental outlook might never return. Guo Shixing emerged with his impressive *Bird Man* in the wake of the big storm. He was a writer with a sense of philosophy. His

work was significant in that it not only portrayed a world of idlers never written about before, but also exhibited the life of an era—a state of existence posing a universal paradox. After the publication of *Chessman* and *Fisherman*, he seemed to have encountered his predicament in writing.

I would say that it is not the incompetence, excessive repression, or loss of spiritual direction on the part of our playwrights, or the entrapment of profit-reaping philosophy that led to spiritual poverty, i.e. philosophical poverty. This psychic anxiety and excessive attention to gains and losses make it difficult to draw inspiration from comprehensive philosophy in dramatic writing.

I once pointed out that *Wotow Guild Hall*, which was comparable to *Tea House*, was a

drama created when the author was trapped in philosophical confusion and therefore far inferior to *The Happy Life of Zhang Damin*. The author lacked reality-transcending thinking when he interpreted the failure of old China in economic terms. And Autumn lacked a philosophical review of the story when it unfolded with credibility as the theme. The final solution to the problem in the play was the grandmother taking out all her savings and everything was fine. It is a faulty work that lacks the persuasiveness of historical logic.

Everyone today is saying that we must tell China's story in a good manner. But what is the criterion? Some TV series themed on the anti-Japanese war have dramatic plot design and are appealing, but can we say they are good stories? The key is what the criteria are for measuring the quality of a story. If a playwright does not adopt the thinking of comprehensive philosophy when he constructs a story, it will be difficult to go beyond the story itself and impossible to explore the connotations and discover the poetic meaning.

People today are vigorously advocating realism, but what kind of realism is being advocated? Is it the realism advocated by Lu Xun that faces life with courage, or is it pseudo-realism? True realism requires courage in the first place. Engels (1960) said, "In addition to truthfulness in realism, what attracts me most is that it reflects the bravery of true artists" (p. 8). Philosophy tells us that life is full of conflicts and we must face up to life. Drama should have the courage to face up to conflicts in real life. At present, avoiding and

whitewashing conflicts have become common problems in the creation of drama. Our theaters have a shortage of works that are relevant to real life and talk about things seriously. As Jiao Juyin put it, very few dramas touch actual life.

The creation of historical drama is another case in point. As Professor Ning Zongyi (2017) points out, "A considerable part of new historical drama lacks historical courage, aspiration or tolerance, and a stereotype is gradually created that assigns immutable qualities to historical figures or even dishonors them. Formulaic historical stories even deviate from the creation principle of 'remaining faithful to major historical events while being flexible about minor ones.' Such works only deal with history itself. A sense of nationality at a higher level and the consciousness of ancient history have not yet been truly formed. In short, there is a lack of tolerance that can be called the soul of history and poetry as well as a lack of the idea of bringing the two together." All dramatic creation, including historical drama, is bound to render itself a prosaic undertaking if it is without historical courage, aspiration or tolerance, namely, philosophical courage, aspiration and tolerance.

Friedrich Engels (1960) once said: "The immense depth of thought and the historical content realized are perfectly integrated with the vividness and richness of Shakespearean plots" (p. 37). This remains to be the highest philosophical standards we are going to reach in dramatic writing.

*(Translator: Tang Qinquan; Editor: Jia Fengrong)*

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