

From the Humbled King to the Pitied Adulteress Localization of Shakespeare in Cao Yu

William Shakespeare is generally acknowledged as the greatest English playwright. His contributions to world theatre are great and his influence on the later playwrights is not limited to the European world but also across to China. Cao Yu (1910–1996), originally named Wan Jiabao, is one of his followers. He is regarded as one of the most remarkable modern Chinese dramatists in the first half of the 20th Century and also honored as the Shakespeare in China because of his great contributions to modern Chinese theatre. The plays he wrote in the 1930s, especially the first two, *Thunderstorm* (1933) and *Sunrise* (1936) brought him to immediate prominence. Later plays, such as *Wilderness* (1937) and *Peking Man* (1940) consolidated his position as the leading contributor to a new theatre in China.

Many critics have noticed that Cao Yu was heavily influenced by William Shakespeare. As Sun Qingsheng points out, “Shakespeare’s vividness in dramatic contents and complexity in the creation of character have been continually attractive to Cao Yu. He also admires Shakespeare’s genius in creating a kind of dialogue which is absolutely true to the designed scene” (442). Cao Yu even translated Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Joliet*, which is later on regarded as one of the best translations of Shakespeare’s plays.

According to the biography of Cao Yu written by Tian Benxiang, Cao Yu first got interested in Shakespeare when he was a student in the English Department of Qinghua University where he spent almost every minute in reading and studying western drama. Shakespeare became one of his favorites (Tian 1998: 118). Shakespeare’s humanist views on life and literature have

profoundly influenced him. Cao Yu once said he was in debt to many foreign writers, the first was Ibsen, and the second was Shakespeare (Pan 1987: 218). It is perhaps true to say that if Cao Yu has absorbed the tragic spirit from Greek tragedies and has accepted realism from Ibsen, then from Shakespeare, he has learned the complexity of human nature, the strength of humanist spirit and the fantastic imagination of a poet. But despite all the Western influences, Cao Yu's plays are thoroughly Chinese in manner, material, and standpoint.

King Lear and *Thunderstorm* are the representative works of Shakespeare and Cao Yu. Both the two plays can be called family tragedies, but neither is isolated from social problems. Through descriptions of the spiritual conflicts of the characters in them, we can witness the great concern of the two playwrights with humanity, their accurate analysis of human nature, and acute observations of and reactions to social environment and system. Through the comparison of the two plays, we can find out evidence of humanistic concerns in both Shakespeare and Cao Yu; and more importantly, we may see how Shakespeare's humanism develops in a different direction in the Chinese playwright as a result of the differences between the two cultures in two different historical backgrounds.

Shakespeare's heritage

Tragedy since the ancient times has concerned itself with human nature, but it is Shakespeare who firstly shakes off the transcendental, universal influence of human behavior and looks sharply and intently into the human heart, which is, as Tom McAlindon's reading of Shakespearean tragedies tells him, "the source of all that is best as well as all that is worst in human nature" (13). We see Shakespeare move from the gods and goddesses of his Greek ancestors to human beings themselves and their inner worlds when we hear Edmund's contemptuous refusal of the belief that "all that we are evil in, by a divine thrusting on" and later Lear's anguish questioning: "Is there any cause in nature that make these hard hearts?" (1. 2. 122-23; 3. 6. 75-6)¹

In presenting to us the inner, spiritual suffering of his tragic heroes in their quest for humanity, Shakespeare shows the subtlety and complexity

¹ The numbers in sequence refer to the act, the scene, and the line numbers as they are in the Arden edition.

of human nature. His characters appear real because they have both strengths and weaknesses in them and they make mistakes. Nobody who has read *King Lear* can deny the king's stupid simplicity in his confusion of vows of love with real virtue or, as Stanley Cavell sees the matter, in his attempt to use his fortune as "a bribe" for the love he desires (61). Some may judge the king more harshly than that by attributing his mistake to his self-arrogance, which, as Richard Halpern argues, provokes the king to take that "grandiose gesture of dividing the kingdom, an act of aggressive generosity that cannot be matched" to the desired effect of "reduc[ing] everyone else to the inferior and passive position of recipient" (249). Halpern's judgment is harsh indeed but not groundless if one remembers how Lear continues to carry himself around like a king after his retirement and how he, in expectation of gratitude from his daughters, keeps reminding them that he has given them all.

So Shakespeare's hero is faulty in character, and the rest of the play shows how the character grows and develops in a painful process of self-realization. Despite the different opinions regarding the cause and nature of the changes in Lear, critics agree that he ends up with a better understanding of the human condition and with true humanity in himself. Understanding humanity not only as a personal integrity but also, and perhaps more importantly, as a deep sympathy in interpersonal relations, Shakespeare shows the transformation of the self-centered king into a man who learns to "embrace other characters", whether it is his wronged daughter or the Fool or the poor in general.² It is this process of character development that again distinguishes Shakespeare from the Greeks and brings a fully-grown, human shape to his hero.

In other words, Shakespeare's hero, and in fact many other characters in the play as well, are presented as individuals with flesh and blood. We find it the same with Cao Yu. In traditional Chinese drama, characters are usually stereotyped. The good and the evil are clearly distinguished as soon as they appear on the stage. The conflicts in the play are usually the fighting between the good and the evil. The ending of the play is always the victory of the former and the punishment on the latter. In this way, the aesthetic effect of praising the good and whipping the evil is achieved, and the moral-teaching purpose of the play is strengthened. Cao Yu did not follow this tradition of ancient classic Chinese drama. In the opinion of Liu Jue, he has created characters which can not be defined simply as good or evil, and therefore can hardly find close counterparts in traditional

² The quoted expression is from Michael Holahan whose argument mainly focuses on the change of Lear's relation with Cordelia (408).

Chinese drama (64). Take Zhou Puyuan for example. Zhou Puyuan, the father of the family, is the chairman of the board of director of a coal-mining company. As the head of the family, he wants to retain his superiority and the family order. He loved the maid Shi Ping when he was young, and even had two sons with her. But Shi Ping was a lower-class girl who was a shame to the Zhous' reputation and a threat to Zhou Puyuan's position in society. His wife should be a lady with money and social position. So he turned her out of his house on a snowstorm night, just three days after she gave birth to his second son, leaving the mother and son in great sufferings. After that, he always feels guilty in conscience. He names their eldest son after her name, remembers her birthday every year, keeps all her favorite furniture, even though he has moved several times, and insists on keeping the windows of her room closed in respect of her old habit. But when they meet again 30 years later, he feels Shi Ping's sudden emergence offends his interest and respect. He turns out to be cold and merciless again. He wants to solve the problem with money in order to keep the decency of the family. No wonder Fan Yi says Zhou Puyuan is the biggest hypocrite in the world and the Zhous is full of evil stories.

But it is this hypocrite alone who remains unharmed physically at the end of the play when the others either die or get mad. From Cao Yu's treatment of his characters, we can see that the playwright is not trying to make a simple moral judgment on his characters. His bitter criticism of Zhou Puyuan, for example, is also accompanied by an insight into the part of his character as a victim caught in the dilemma between his intention and action, as we have observed in the above.

Cao Yu's deep understanding of human nature is actually seen in all his characters who are driven by their own natural desires instead of by any moral missions. Among all of them, Fan Yi is by all means the most extraordinary character. The most shocking feature in Fan Yi is her breaking up the legend of mother image. According to Chinese culture, mother is always the most self-sacrificing person in the family. She cares about everyone but herself. She should be not only the symbol of diligence, tolerance and devotion, but also the guard of social system and cultural conventions. In Chinese literature, mother image is always holy, the image of love and sacrifice. Mother as a natural woman, especially a woman with natural, sexual desires is completely ignored. Fan Yi breaks the silence. She not only shouts out her pain of loneliness as a woman, but also has an affair with her stepson Zhou Ping, which is considered in Chinese culture to be the most evil thing for a woman, not to say a mother. She abandons her family roles as mother and wife, and only chooses to be a mistress. Even when she faces the choice between her lover and son, she never hesitates

to choose the former. She definitely expresses her choice of the roles in the family when Zhou Ping reminds her not to forget her role as a mother and should behave herself: *No! I'm not! Ever since I placed my life and my reputation in your hands I've shut myself off from everything else. No, I'm not his mother, no more than I'm Chou Pu-yuan's wife!* (Cao 1996, 52, Wang Zuoliang's translation). When she realizes she is going to lose Zhou Ping, the only comfort of her body and soul in the family, she begins to revenge deadly, without caring about the crash of herself. "She is like the lightening through the darkness of the night, though short and disappears immediately, yet has burned into the most shining and beautiful fire flower" (Cao 1996: 19, Chen Lihua's translation). Although Fan Yi is by no means the symbol of morality and she has totally broken the ideal image of mother, yet the light she shines proves her vitality as a living woman and her amazing courage to challenge culture and social conventions. As an ordinary woman, who is always considered to be fragile and weak in traditional Chinese culture, Fan Yi has shown the other side of a woman, the side as an equal, individual human fighting for existence and she has certainly proved the meaning and value of an individual being. Because of this, Fan Yi has aroused a lot of sympathy and praise from the Chinese audience instead of hatred and criticism as this character might have. This character also proves Cao Yu's sharp insight into human nature and deep concern with humanity, which, according to Li Yang, can best represent the modernity of Cao Yu (46).

The credulity of characters no doubt contributes to the sense of realism in drama. In the cases of Shakespeare and Cao Yu, they recreate reality not only through characterization, which is internal reality, but also through their depiction of the external reality in human society. The following speech by Lear in his madness strike reader such as Arnold Kettle as "the deepest and acutest social criticism" (25):

Lear. [...] Thou hast seen a farmer's dog bark at a beggar?

Glou. Ay, sir.

Lear. And the creature from the cur? There thou might'st behold

The great image of Authority:

A dog's obey'd in office.

Thou rascal beadle, hold thy bloody hand!

Why dost thou lash that whore? Strip thine own back;

Thou hotly lusts to use her in that kind

For which thou whipp'st her. The usurer hangs the cozener.

Through tatter'd clothes small vices do appear;

Robes and furr'd gowns hide all. Plate sin with gold,

And the strong lance of justice hurtles breaks;

Arm it in rags, a pigmy's straw does pierce it. (4. 6. 152-165)

There is almost something radical here in Lear's questioning of the validity of authority, which is the basis of any hierarchical society.

Lear's insight into the unfairness of society is inseparable from his identification with the poor, for it is here that the external reality meets with the internal. Following the Fool into the cave and being thus protected from the storm, the deprived king comes to a new understanding of those who are even less fortunate than he is:

Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these? O! I have ta'en
Too little care of this. Take physic, Pomp;
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,
And show the Heavens more just. (3. 4. 28-36)

This is the other side of life that Lear once as the privileged king was never able to see, and by plunging himself into this horrible aspect of reality and feeling its helplessness as the wretched would feel, Lear attains a new, common humanity.

Social criticism is just as acute in Cao Yu as it is in Shakespeare. As a writer of realism, Cao Yu is always sensitive to and sharp-sighted about the societal causes for the family tragedies. In *Thunderstorm*, we can find a panorama of feudal Chinese society. When Cao Yu wrote *Thunderstorm*, it was the darkest period in Chinese history. There was no peace for a day. People were living in an abyss of misery. Men of thought took their pens to express their deep concern about society and human conditions in it. As we can see in *Thunderstorm*, family tragedy is closely combined with social tragedy. The play reflects the social conflicts in every aspect. There are lawbreaking capitalists and homeless workers. There are not only love and hate among masters, maids and servants, but also conspiracy, blackmail and strikes. Besides the description of the relationship among family members, such as husbands and wives, sisters and brothers, there is also social relationship such as that between capitalists and laborers. Zhou Puyuan, as the representative figure of new capitalists in old China, is a typical example of the cruelty of capitalists. He is ready to give in to anything or anybody so long as there is money in it. He once got the police to mow down his workers. When he contracted to repair the bridge over the river of Harbin, he deliberately breached the dyke, drowning two thousand coolies in cold blood, and for each life lost he raked in three hundred dollars. Just as his wife Fan Yi says:

I've heard all about the sins of the Chous – and seen them – and committed myself. Not that I've ever considered myself one of you: what I've done I've done on my own responsibility. No, I'm not like your grandfather, or your great-uncle, or your dear father himself – doing the most atrocious things in private, and wearing a mask of morality in public. Philanthropists, respectable citizens, pillars of society! (Cao 1996: 50)

Therefore, what *Thunderstorm* presents to its readers or audience is also the epitome of China in 1930s.

In tragedies by Shakespeare and Cao Yu, social problems come in as a key element, as the tragic protagonists often find themselves caught in the conflicts between their desires and the time. Though generally understood as a tragedy of character, *King Lear* is also a tragedy of circumstance. Of course, not everyone would see the cause of Lear's tragedy in nothing but his incongruity with the time in its transition from feudalism to capitalism, or as Kiernan Ryan puts it, in the fact of his being born before his time and therefore "overpowered by the prevailing social and ideological tides which sweep [him] unawares out of [his] depth" (76). But what every reader of *King Lear* would be deeply touched by is the same kind of human spirit in the act of defiance or challenge as that in Greek tragedies, only that in Shakespeare it is not against Fate but against the cruelty of reality. Though we tend to agree with Brian Vickers in seeing the reality more on the level of basic human nature, that is, more as "a disaster deriving from human conflicts" than social struggles, we suppose it is perfectly right for us to say that Shakespeare's concern with social reality, especially at the bottom level, enriches the humanism of his tragic hero, and is what links him closely and immediately to his Chinese disciple (152).

In Cao Yu's *Thunderstorm*, readers are also very much touched by the defiance against or resistance to fate or environment put up by its characters. In traditional Chinese tragedies, characters are always the passive sufferers of fate and environment. They seldom take actions to save themselves because they believe that it's useless to fight against fate or that the good will be rewarded and the evil will be punished sooner or later, even after death. So many scholars have doubted about whether there is any tragedy in the real sense in traditional Chinese drama. Lu Xun, the great modernist Chinese writer, says that traditional Chinese drama always creates an unbelievable happy ending to prevent the readers or audience from seeing the truth, for the purpose of cheating and fooling the people. Thus the tragic spirit is totally lost (Lu 1957: 328). Yet in *Thunderstorm*, we see no happy ending for anyone. All the characters in it are trying their best to save themselves, although the result turns out to be the opposite. The most violent fighting comes from Fan Yi. She is the victim of feudal patriarchy which has prevailed in China in the past thousands of years and which denies women's independence and freedom. According to this feudal ideology,

women hardly have a say in the family. Before they are married, they must obey their fathers. After the marriage, they must obey their husbands, and if their husbands die, they must obey their sons. This is another root cause for the tragedy in *Thunderstorm*.

Fan Yi becomes the most tragic character in the play, not because she suffers the most in the play, but because her rebellion is the strongest. She is a new woman of the May 4th movement, influenced by fresh new ideas of women's rights and freedom in family and society. She cannot bear the oppression of her husband, who always behaves like her master. She feels being crushed and smothered by her husband in a prison-like home. As she says, the Zhou's house is "a soul-destroying place" (Cao 1996: 51). Marriage means misery to her. Although a woman, weak in appearance, she has done the boldest things to rebel against the oppression – one is to have an affair with her stepson, the other is to revenge on the betraying lover. She shows her determination as she says: "I don't regret it. I've never regretted anything." (Cao 1996: 49). In Fan Yi's boldness and determination to fulfill herself in the most hostile environment, at the cost of having herself destroyed even, one sees the same kind of tragic spirit as that in Shakespeare's *King Lear*.

Differences between Shakespeare and Cao Yu

As we can see in the above analysis, Shakespeare has a profound influence on Cao Yu, whose concern about the reality of human condition is as keen as his English Master's. But, as we can expect from any two writers with differences as obvious as theirs, they've got to think and write differently from each other in many ways. For example, Shakespeare keeps the role of a tragic hero for the nobles only, in which case he follows the Greek tradition, whereas Cao Yu has the commoners as his tragic heroes or heroines. His preference goes especially to ordinary women. Cao Yu's mother died of puerperal fever three days after giving birth to the son. Growing up with the absence of mother made Cao Yu quiet and sensitive in character. His mother's death and later on his beloved elder sister's death hurt Cao Yu's heart deeply and made him feel very sympathetic to women's fate. In his masterpieces, Cao Yu has made a dozen of women characters as the heroines. Almost all of the women characters in his early plays are young and beautiful but doomed to failure and death. The playwright's attention to their suffering and pain shows his deep concern about people at the bottom of society. So the difference between Shakespeare and Cao

Yu is obvious here. This difference of the status of the hero or heroine in itself might appear superficial, but the moral values reflected in the writers' choices of their protagonists can be different in a very subtle way, which are then expressed in the characters' views of themselves, of society, and of their relations with it.

Man is related to society as nature is to order. Though Cao Yu shares with Shakespeare his concern with human suffering in a disordered society, he differs from the other in what has caused the social evils and whether to keep the order. In Shakespeare's *King Lear*, inhumanity is the result of the loss of order, of action against nature when the kingdom is split up and the royal daughters refuse to pay duty to their father, the illegitimate son plots against his brother, and subjects turn away from the king. As a contrast, inhumanity is diagnosed by Cao Yu as the sickness of the existent order or, to be exact, the unfair feudal system that has prevailed in China for thousands of years. Feudal ideology deprived women of equal social and family positions and the unprivileged people could not control their own fate. These are the two main social causes for Cao's tragedies. In *Thunderstorm*, we can see that the two generations of working class women, mother and daughter, have suffered from the same tragedy: being seduced by the male master and unable to get a legal position in the family, not to say happiness. Tragedy repeats itself cruelly due to the unfair social system and the prejudice in culture.

The fact that Cao Yu has a different sense of social order from Shakespeare is further established by the different treatments the two playwrights give to the breakers of the old order in their respective plays, sympathy in one case, and condemnation in the other. But the greatness of Shakespeare lies probably less in having all his villains condemned than in showing the unique and significant aspects of the condemned. In hearing Edmund's bitter questioning of nature: "Why bastard? Wherefore base?" one comes to an understanding of evil produced out of social injustice (1. 2. 6). Later, as he shouts his distrust of planetary influence on human behavior, saying "I should have been that I am had the maidenliest star in the firmament twinkled on my bastardizing," one cannot even help admiring his courage in accepting full responsibility for whatever he is or is to do (1. 2. 128-130). Christopher Pye's remark on Edgar, that he is significant to early modernity because of his capacities as "a self-inventing subject," is also applicable to Edmund, I think (102). His defiant expression of the self certainly entitles him to a "man of his own making" (Pye 2000: 102).

In this respect, Fan Yi is like him and may be called a female Edmund. Casting off the traditional roles assigned to her by social and cultural conventions, she creates a new self by following her own natural desires. Different from her condemned counterpart in *King Lear*, Fan Yi gets much

more sympathy from her creator as we can find in Cao's own words: "She is worth being highly praised. She has burning enthusiasm, a brave, strong heart, never submitted to the yokes of tyranny. Although also fell in the burning fire pot, she is always fighting as a caged animal" (Cao 1996: 19, Chen Lihua's translation). In the above comment, Cao Yu shows his great admiration and sympathy to this woman. He believes that she is like burning fire that will destroy everything unfair in the world, even at the cost of her own life. "She is obviously a strong-minded woman of determination." "She is like a stubborn wild horse." "There is a primitive wildness in her which is an evidence of her courage." (Cao 1996: 9, Chen Lihua's translation). In Cao's eyes, she is a beautiful woman of intelligence, of courage and of vitality. Even though irrational in action sometimes, she is free in spirit and decisive in action.

In Cao Yu's presentation of the tragic fate of his heroine, the social elements of the tragedy are much more emphasized than they are in Shakespeare. The Elizabethan writer's rather conventional idea about social order considered, it is not unexpected to find him at the end of the story putting hope into the reestablishment of the feudal order in its better version. But again, we should never take Shakespeare simply as a propagator of political conservatism. We have already seen Lear question authority, the basis of any hierarchical society, in his social criticism earlier in this paper. And, as Michael Hattaway rightly argues, "The very act of placing a tragic action at court was, because of the particular decorum of English tragedy, likely to demystify the authority of prince and courtiers" (104). Edgar's far-from-being-optimistic speech that closes the play seems also to have the effect of destabilizing the reader's confidence in the social order to be established. Nevertheless, when taking the whole play into account, I tend to agree with Kathleen McLuskie's general argument in her paper that the play is a reassurance of order, though I do not accept all her analysis of the play from her feminist approach.

In *Thunderstorm*, hope in breaking up the old order and setting up a new society is obvious. A symbol of the feudal system in China, the old house of the Zhous is like a prison that yokes people's spirit of freedom. After the innocent death of the three young people, the house is broken, the Zhous' family is broken, and the feudal family order is broken as well. *Thunderstorm* is the biggest symbol in the play. It not only symbolizes the mysterious power that controls the characters' fate, but also symbolizes a complete revolution, washing all the dirty things away, leaving a hope that after the thunderstorm, there will be a fine day with a beautiful rainbow. As Cao Yu once said: "what I saw and heard everyday hurt my heart deeply. I felt strongly that this is a society that must be torn down and built up a new" (qtd. in Tian 1998: 45, Chen Lihua's translation).

The different values taken by Shakespeares and Cao Yu are partly decided by the vastly different social realities the writers' were situated in and the different extents to which they got themselves involved in the realities. As Elizabethan England was politically far less turbulent than China in the early twentieth century, it is understandable that Shakespeare could not feel as strongly as the Chines writer did about the necessity and urgency of a revolution. This may also explain the contrast between the remoteness of the myth-like Lear story, the Hamlet and Macbeth stories, and the contemporariness of Cao Yu's plays.

The writer's personal and social identities constitute another deciding element in his values. There has been much controversy about shakespeare's political stand, whether he is, as Sir Walter Raleigh regards him, "a good Tory, a believer in rank and institution and the established order," or a poet for the commoner. In comparison, Cao Yu's political position is much more definite. The Chinese writer's own personal involvement with the miserable suffering of people at bottom of society and the influence of the revolutionary spirit of the May 4th movement seemed to have convinced him that there would be no reconciliation with Feudalist system and that any kind of reform would prove to be invalid, because this system was dehumanizing in the essence.

Despite the strong political conviction of the Chinese Playwrigth, Cao Yu's writings do not degenerate into political propaganda, probably partly owing to the sense of ambiguity in his description of the mysterious power of fate, from which no one can ever escape. Similarly, many of Shakespeare's readers find his charm in the complexity, multiplicity, and even ambiguity of his ideas and attitudes, which leave his works open to interpretations and even to possibilities of transgression and disruption (Hedrick and Reynolds). That the founders of colonial liberty in America drew strength from the humanism of Shakespeare and Hooker the philosopher is an example of how the literary Shakespeare can be appropriated to inspire a political cause. Whether Cao Yu has learnt any particular lesson apart from the humanistic concern from the great English writer is in doubt, but not totally out of the question.

In his study of Shakespearean drama, Terry Eagleton appraises Shakespeare's "effort to reconcile spontaneous life and social responsibility" (11). Here we may say the same for Cao Yu. For all their differences and similarities, the two writers have contributed tremendously to our understanding of humanity in its relation to society.

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