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**Cultural Intermediary by Adaptation for Realism:
An Analysis of Hong Shen's Works during Tsinghua College and the
United States Era**

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ABSTRACT

Hong Shen 洪深 (1894-1955) is regarded as one of the founders of modern Chinese drama, however, the research on his life and works has been long neglected. This paper is divided into two parts, in which the first part will be the literature review on Hong Shen, and the second part will analyse Hong Shen's works during Tsinghua College and the United States Era. The purpose of this paper is to re-examine Hong Shen's contribution to modern Chinese drama by studying his adaptation works before coming back from the United States to China, which marked the beginning of his creative career. By studying the other side of his works, this paper aims to provide another interpretation on Hong Shen, analyse the meaning and significance of adaptation works in modern Chinese drama, as well as the relationship between adaptation and realism.

KEYWORDS: Hong Shen, adaptation, left-wing, realism, modern Chinese drama, cultural intermediary

1 INTRODUCTION

Hong Shen 洪深 (1894-1955) is regarded as one of the three founders of modern Chinese drama, however, the research on his life and works has been long neglected compared with Tian Han 田漢 (1898-1968) and Xia Yan 夏衍 (1900-1995). This paper is to re-examine Hong Shen's uniqueness and important role among modern Chinese left-wing dramatists by studying his adaptation works during Tsinghua College and the United States Era. The methodology of this paper differentiates with the previous research on Hong Shen, as the latter usually studies his original works rather than adaptation works, as well as his creative career after coming back from the United States to China rather than the earlier period. By studying the other side of his works, this paper aims to provide another interpretation on Hong Shen, analyse the meaning and significance of adaptation works in modern Chinese drama, as well as the relationship between adaptation and realism.

2 THE PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON HONG SHEN AND THE RE-ANALYSIS OF REALISM, LEFT-WING WRITERS AND MODERN CHINESE DRAMA

Realism has long dominated the mainstream when the modern Chinese drama was born in the early twentieth century. Hong Shen was given an important role in this development; from the Western realism started in the May Fourth Era to socialistic realism since the establishment of Chinese Left-Wing Writers Alliance in 1930, and even was regarded as the representative who led to the development of leftist mechanical realism in the New Era. This comment is generally acknowledged and stereotypes some particular views on realism, left-wing literature and the history of modern Chinese drama. In addition, this comment leads to a paradoxical phenomenon in the research on Hong Shen — although Hong Shen is well known as one of the founders of modern Chinese drama, studies on him have long been neglected. Therefore the re-examination of Hong Shen is not only to re-arouse our attention to this important dramatist, but also offer a chance for us to rethink some important issues in the studies of modern Chinese drama.

In summarizing Hong Shen's creative theories, many critics agree that Hong Shen's works reflect a typical socialistic realism. From *A Pear Seller* 《賣梨人》 and *A Tragedy of the Poor* 《貧民慘劇》 written in Hong Shen's early stage when he was a Tsinghua College student, to his representative work *A Rural Trilogy* 《農村三部曲》 which is regarded as China's first modern drama “that fully reflects the suffering and struggle of peasants” (Chen, 1960), realism seems to be consistent throughout his creative career. However, if we study the works of Hong Shen carefully, we will find that realism only consists part of his dramatic works. In fact, Hong Shen's early works in Tsinghua College and his English plays written in the United States seldom enter the scope of current research.

Moreover, it should be carefully noted that there is a certain gap between the image established by the CCP after Hong Shen's death in the 1950s and the actual historical situation. Both the remembrance of dramatists survived after the Cultural Revolution and the two biographies of Hong Shen (un)intentionally demonstrated a positive image of a realist left-wing playwright for Hong Shen (Chen and Song, 1996, Han, 2000), showing the lingering ideological influences over the past few decades. In a speech at Hong Shen's fiftieth birthday, Xia Yan (1944) described Hong Shen as “a thoroughly ‘art for life's sake’ writer, thoroughly ‘utilitarian.’” This praise during the Anti-Japanese War became a censure after the New Era, Hong Shen's theatrical theories were then summarized as a kind of “for life” utilitarian social criticism, and even a “vulgar sociological theatrical criticism” that “curb freedom of artistic creation, regarding art as an annotation of the megaphone of political creed” during the Cultural Revolution (Song, 2002).

If we study the above commentaries carefully, it can be said that Hong Shen's realistic position was in fact based on his established identity as a left-wing playwright. This shows how the ups and downs of ideological thoughts act as an evaluation standard in different historical periods, which affirms that the traditional literary criticism "knowing the person by understanding the age in which one lives" 「知人論世」 still plays an important role in China during the twentieth century, and that the complicated relationship exists between literature and politics. In recent years, new thinking directions have been provided thanks to the new biographical information and researches on Hong Shen, following an extensively annotated chronicle for Hong Shen published by his daughter Hong Qian 洪鈺 in 2011, as well as the Hong Shen Symposium held at the Ohio State University in 2013. Among which, Chen Xiaomei 陳小眉 (2014) had pointed out the ambiguity of the literature-politics approach. Under the dual narratives of both political and literary histories in the past, Hong Shen was regarded as a representative left-wing writer, but there is still room for further discussion on how Hong Shen thought about his political identity and how was the real situation. As a matter of fact, Hong Shen tried his best to stay far away from politics throughout his life, Hong Shen's father Hong Shuzu 洪述祖 (1855-1919), an official working in the Yuan Shikai's 袁世凱 (1859-1916) government, was executed as charged that he was implicated as a scapegoat in the assassination of Song Jiaoren 宋教仁 (1882-1913), and this became a life-long trauma for Hong Shen (1957: IV, pp. 529-531). Although Hong Shen had accepted an official post in the wartime period, this decision conflicted with his own will (1957: IV, pp. 539-548). Moreover, as a member of the KMT, Hong Shen was mistrusted by the CCP. This can be evidenced with an article written by Hong Qian (2013), which disclosed the factual proof of Hong Shen's suicide attempt in 1941 from a former close friend of her father in the 1980s. From the above, it is rather ironical to consider Hong Shen as a typical left-wing writer nowadays.

Hong Shen's realistic literary theories have been usually interpreted from the perspective of the left-wing ideology, but there are critics who have raised various arguments in recent years. For example, *Wukui Bridge* 《五奎橋》 (the first part of *A Rural Trilogy*) has been regarded as a socialist propaganda for a long time, and it is only until recent years that Chen Xiaomei (2014) argued that there are excellent dramatic conflicts between different characters in the play, which have demonstrated a strong theatrical tradition of Western drama, as well as the spirit similar to the Greek tragedy *Antigone* and Hong Shen's interest in "well-made play." In fact, Hong Shen studied orthodox professional curriculum in the United States and was the earliest pioneer to introduce Western drama to China. Therefore, the approaches of Western drama and comparative literature can provide us a new horizon when re-examining Hong Shen's works.

In addition, critics usually adopt independent approaches of drama literature and theatrical performance in discussing Hong Shen's drama creations and directing works due to their different professional classifications. For example, Jiao Shangzhi 焦尚志 (1995) claimed that the drama works written by Hong Shen were influenced by Marxist literary ideas, "which sometimes weakened and blurred his faith in theater arts." However, when discussing the drama works directed by Hong Shen, he claimed that Hong Shen had a "widespread uptake of [.....] subjective, non-realistic stage performance methods and aesthetic factors," which "show an increasingly interest and serious thinking in the issue of formal beauty." These two comments appear to be contradictory due to the isolation from Hong Shen's literary works and theatrical activities. Hence, there is a need to understand Hong Shen's realistic proposition by studying the relationship of his drama literature and theatrical performance in a more comprehensive way.

3 HONG SHEN'S WORKS DURING TSINGHUA COLLEGE AND THE UNITED STATES ERA

The introduction of foreign drama has played a significant role in the history of modern Chinese drama. Since the May Fourth period, the major controversy had been “how to introduce foreign drama” and “whether it should be adopted or adapted.” In fact, adaptation forms an integral part of Hong Shen’s works, where Hong Shen’s stance and practice of adaptation had a far-reaching impact on the development of modern Chinese drama, yet they are always neglected. In order to explore his stance on Chinese and Western culture, this part examines how Hong Shen served as a cultural intermediary during Tsinghua College and the United States era, and finally discusses his stance and practice of realism.

The student life at Tsinghua College marked the beginning of Hong Shen’s theatrical activities. As mentioned above, *The Pear Seller* and *The Tragedy of the Poor* were given high importance by the critics as these two works show a strong realism and empathy towards the lower levels of the society, and this trend was regarded to be even extended to Hong Shen’s future creative works (Zhang, 1936). In fact, prior to *The Pear Seller* and *The Tragedy of the Poor*, Hong Shen had adapted and performed in the famous English play *Robin Hood* in 1914, therefore Hong Shen’s creations actually began with adaptation. This section discusses Hong Shen’s earliest non-dramatic works while at Tsinghua College, in order to widen the current research horizons.

It has been known that some of Hong Shen’s earliest works were published in *Fiction Monthly* 《小說月報》, an important literary magazine established in the late Qing, with Yun Tieqiao 惲鐵樵 (1878-1935), an important figure of the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies School as the chief editor. These debut works of Hong Shen were not playscripts, but they reflected a strong style of the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies which differed from his latter works. The background of a short fiction “Escape by Sheer Luck” 〈幸而免〉 (1913) was set in Paris and was written in classical Chinese. This story tells that Earl Brad 白梁伯爵 and Lady Bert 包德夫人 plan for elopement to London, but incidents happened to stop them from meeting appointment on that day. As a result, both of them believed that the promise was broken by the other party. Lady Bert returns home to live her original life. Then after, Williamson 威廉生, a friend of Doctor Bert 包德醫生 tells him that his wife conducted an improper behavior. Surprisingly, Doctor Bert burns out the good-bye letter written by Lady Bert, thus solving the marriage crisis that may happen. With various unexpected plots and climaxes and the proximity of Western literature, this work demonstrates a strong style of the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies School.

In addition, Hong Shen had written another article “Famous European and American Drama” 〈歐美名劇〉 (1915) in classical Chinese published in *Fiction Monthly*, under the pseudonym Le Shui 樂水. The article is the introduction to the European and American plays such as *A Doll’s House* by Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906), *A Woman Killed with Kindness* and *The Fair Maid of the West* by Thomas Heywood (1570-1641), as well as *L’Avare* by Molière (1622-1673). In which, Hong Shen firstly outlined the plots, and then summarized the lessons could be learnt from the story, which is a method commonly used by Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies School.

Hong Shen’s earliest contribution to *Fiction Monthly* has enabled us to ponder the direction of another starting point for his creations, as well as his future development. On one hand, the publishing field and the writing style of *Fiction Monthly* reflects Hong Shen’s literary origins in the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies School. On the other hand, the works show a deep imagination and understanding of the Western culture, reflecting Hong Shen’s strong interest to act as a cultural intermediary through altered translation or adaptation. The literary translation norm of the late Qing literati and writers of the Mandarin Ducks and

Butterflies School differed largely from the source-text-oriented concept emerged since the May Fourth period, as the former valued literary level more than the accuracy due to the prevailing social values and requirements (Kwan, 2008). In the late Qing, Zhang Zhidong 張之洞 (1837-1909) put forward his position: “Chinese knowledge as the body, Western learning for use” 「中學為體，西學為用」, which was commonly acknowledged as a nationwide philosophical thinking. This perspective was certainly inherited from the traditional ideals of Chinese Confucian “practical statesmanship” 「經世致用」, which was meant to achieve the ultimate goal of building up China that the introduction of Western works could only serve as a means although the Western culture has its own values. Under this thinking premise, the understanding and acceptance of the common Chinese readers was apparently more important than the accurate expression of the Western origins. As such, rewriting and adaptation would better achieve the desired results than source-text-oriented translation.

The spring up of new drama and civilized drama in the late Qing and early Republican period was also inseparable from this ideological trend. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* 《黑奴籲天錄》, Spring Willow Society's 春柳社 representative work and “the first written script of Chinese spoken drama,” was adapted on the stage from the novel translated by Lin Shu 林紓 (1852-1924) and Wei Yi 魏易(1880-1930), and their motive was to arouse Chinese nationalism. By focusing on plots, the practice of adaptation focused on bringing out the lessons and thoughts beyond the literary works so as to cater for the needs of the Chinese audience, considering the discrepancy between different cultures.

After his graduation from Tsinghua College, Hong Shen went to the United States for further study, where he had later written English plays such as *The Wedded Husband* 《為之有室》, *The Return* 《回去》, *Rainbow* 《虹》, *The Cow-Herd and the Weaving-Maid* 《牛郎織女》 and so on. All these plays demonstrate Hong Shen's consciousness of national and cultural identity, as well as his strong intention to “make China known to Americans.” The three-act play, *The Wedded Husband* was performed on “China Night” of the “Ethnic Night” for the World Student Association when Hong Shen was a student at Ohio State University. The story tells that Miss Wang's father wanted to wed his daughter to Master Chen who has congenital dementia, despite the daughter was in love with Mr Yang. As a result, all of the characters in the story are willing to sacrifice their own feelings: Miss Wang followed her father's arrangement, while Mr Yang travelled far away to Mongolia. During the wedding, however, Miss Wang fell into a coma as she contracted the plague. When she woke up, she was aware that Master Chen had died, and Mr Yang had returned from Mongolia. Originally Miss Wang wanted to marry Mr Yang, but when she learned from her maid that Master Chen was died from plague because he had been looking after her while she was in coma, Miss Wang decided not to marry again as in remembrance of Master Chen.

Hong Shen stated that he had selected this story because it has a “very strong oriental flavour” and can represent Chinese culture, and may also avoid the stereotype of a happy ending which is popular in the American world. Hong Shen even hoped that this Chinese-style thinking could throb the Americans: “These are the beautiful sacrifices that surely resulted in better ending than the Western marriage binding on material life; and this is something what Americans are not willing to do so. Why not just let it act out to influence the Americans! Is it my brilliant scheme?! And to my surprise some of the Americans understood and accepted it” (1957: I, pp. 481). Hong Shen acknowledged that *The Wedded Husband* was adapted from the popular novel “A Stalk of Hemp” 〈一縷麻〉 written by Bao Tianxiao 包天笑 (1876-1973) (pseudonym as Qiuxingge biji 秋星閣筆記) in 1909, a famous writer of the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies School. The dramatic plots prove again Hong Shen's preference for works of the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies School. Notably, *The Wedded Husband* has a subtitle “a realist Chinese play”, which means that Hong Shen did not interpret

the story as a sad romantic legend as the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies School writers, but did demonstrate it as “reflecting reality” in order to promote Chinese culture and to influence the American audience.

The Return and *Rainbow* were written before Hong Shen’s admission to Harvard University in 1921 and after the Treaty of Versailles was signed that the background to both works was set in WWI. Hong Shen recalled *The Return* as a “one-act play about the situation after the outbreak of the European war.” Three-act play *Rainbow* described that a family in Shandong heard about that the United States had declared war on Germany, and, having believed the United States represented the justice, they sent their two sons to Europe to take part in the war. The soldiers returned after Germany’s defeat, but the two young men were killed in the battle. The US President Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924) broke his promise on the Peace Conference convened in Paris, while Qingdao was ceded to Japan. Since then, the Chinese people realized that their sacrifices had all been in vain. In Hong Shen’s own words, “what depicted in this play is all factual that there is nothing groundless and unhistorical; apparently it is a kind of propaganda and criticism towards the Americans” (1957: I, pp. 482). By emphasizing that it “reflects the reality,” this play expressed China’s discontent to American audience.

After his graduation from Harvard University, Hong Shen worked at a professional theater in the United States, where he wrote the one-act play *The Cow-Herd and the Weaving-Maid* and co-edited the 11-act English drama *Mulan Joins the Army* 《木蘭從軍》 with Zhang Pengchun 張彭春 (1892-1957). Adapted from Chinese classical stories, both works flexibly demonstrated the opera performing arts with singing removed and the usage of English dialogue, without clinging to the convention of the Chinese opera performances or the general grandstanding of Chinese variety performances in the United States. Since both works retain Chinese national characteristics, the American audience could accept and understand it. Hong Shen (1935) later recalled that “it is the success of the English drama *Mulan Joins the Army* in the United States that makes the American audience later accepted Mei Lanfang’s 梅蘭芳 (1894-1961) Chinese opera even though it was not performed in English.” These two works eventually received a warm welcome from American audience, and broadened their horizons on the Chinese opera.

4 CONCLUSION

From the analysis of Hong Shen’s works written during his early life in Tsinghua College and in the United States, it can be seen that he was enthusiastic to become a cultural intermediary. Hong Shen’s works at Tsinghua College reflect his literary origins in the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies School. His earliest contribution to *Fiction Monthly* demonstrates his deep imagination and understanding of the Western culture. By the strategy of adaptation, he introduced Western drama literature to Chinese readers. In the opposite, after he went to the United States, he used the plots from the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies School or classical folklore as the materials of adaptation, in order to enable the American audience to understand and accept the Chinese opera, as well as to stress the reality of Chinese society and culture that sought to show the American audience the real China. Both the Tsinghua College and the United States periods of Hong Shen’s creative career shows that the method of adaptation could achieve realistic and pragmatist purposes. Understanding this point is extremely important for Hong Shen because his theatrical activities after returning to China can be considered as an extension of this development.

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