

An Analysis of the National Appeal of Avant-Garde Dramas from the Original Creation of Gao Xingjian's Dramas

--Taking *Absolute Signal*, *Station* and *Savage* as Examples

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Abstract: In the 1980s, the Chinese drama world was full of ups and downs. Gao Xingjian was one of the important figures who launched the “Wind Blow Snow”. This paper tries to see the national pursuit of Chinese avant-garde drama from the creation of Gao Xingjian's dramas.

1. Introduction

In the development of Chinese dramas, the 1980s were full of difficulties. Some of these dilemmas came from the form itself and the aging thoughts of Chinese dramas, as well as from the obstacles and challenges of film and television. In such a difficult situation, there must be people who were not comfortable with the status quo to make innovative changes. This paper tries to take Gao Xingjian's works *Absolute Signal*, *Station* and *Savage* as examples to study the demands of avant-garde dramas for national elements from four perspectives, that are, process, advantage, loss, and summary. It is worth noting that the nationality in this paper refers to some elements in Chinese opera and Chinese folk art.

2. Course of Gao Xingjian's Appeal to the National Characteristic of Dramas

Gao Xingjian's drama creation is deeply influenced by Chinese opera, with national characteristic. This kind of Chinese avant-garde dramas was not created by Gao Xingjian shutting himself up. They are divided into absorption, thinking and creation, which reflected the national appeal of Gao Xingjian's Chinese avant-garde dramas.

2.1 Influence of Modern Drama Theory and Chinese Opera (Absorption)

Gao Xingjian's growth and learning experience are important bases for his appeal to the national character of dramas. Most modern people's evaluations of Gao Xingjian come from artists of painting, novel and drama. However, the subtle influence of drama on Gao Xingjian began from his childhood. Gao Xingjian's mother is an actor, so he was infatuated with the stage and always immersed himself in the theater since he was a child. Some script forms and performance techniques of opera planted seeds in his young heart. However, he failed to study acting in middle school because of his age and height.

After entering the university, Gao Xingjian studied French. The solid French foundation brought great convenience to his later study of drama theory and new drama trend of thought. As Li Longyun, a playwright, said, “Gao Xingjian has one advantage: He can speak French” [1]. In the university, when Gao Xingjian and his classmates set up a drama troupe (Seagull Drama Troupe), he began to come into contact with some drama theories and watched a large number of Chinese dramas such as *Teahouse* and *Guan Hanqing* on weekends. In the junior year, Gao Xingjian came into contact with Stanislavsky's theory. In the senior year, he got to know Brecht's and Meyerhold's theories. During this period, Gao Xingjian began to have some doubts and dissatisfaction with Ibsen Stanislavsky's theory. However, before graduation, his ability and theory were limited, so no reform was initiated. The constant absorption of stage art during his growing up has laid a good foundation for the later dramatic reform, and has also continuously strengthened his confidence in Chinese

opera and Chinese folk art.

2.2 Put Forward the Concept of “Sinicization of the West” after Practice (Thinking and Creation)

In the process of Gao Xingjian's appeal to the national character of dramas, thinking and creation were two inseparable parts. After graduation, by taking advantage of the French foreign affairs work, Gao Xingjian came into contact with more thoughts about drama. Many ideas that had been initiated in the past have now been confirmed. His vision has been broadened and led him to think more deeply [2]. Gao Xingjian constantly challenges Stanislavsky's and Ibsen's ideas through his creation. Meanwhile, he ceaselessly integrated elements of Chinese opera into scripts. Before 1980, he created ten plays that were not accepted by people at that time. Although these plays were ignored, Gao Xingjian seized the inspiration again, and then created six high-quality plays, such as *Absolute Signal* (1982), *Station* (1983), *Modern Opera Highlights* (1984). *Savage* took him four or five months to study the upper and lower reaches of the Yangtze River. *Absolute Signal*, *Station* and *Savage* have all been performed on the stage of Beijing People's Art Theatre after the second creation by the director Lin Zhaohua, bringing new fashion to the drama circle. During the cooperation between Gao Xingjian and Lin Zhaohua, they helped each other and broke the current situation that “modern Chinese drama has been totally Russianized in the past decade. Only Stanislavsky's classic works are edited, directed and performed” [3]. They showed the modern drama techniques and performance advantages of Chinese opera on the stage of Chinese drama in the 1980s. Gao Xingjian constantly integrated flexible concepts of time and space of Chinese opera into the script, and emphasized again the importance of making good use of singing, speaking, acting and playing in the performance in the “suggestions on performance” after the script.

Although the novels of the 1980s were just in the prosperous period and Gao Xingjian's novels were flourishing, he was not afraid to touch drama. While he felt self-confident in Chinese opera, he proposed the concept of “Sinicization of the West” in combination with the advantages of Western dramas and his original intention of creating dramas [4]. (Before Gao Xingjian put forward the drama idea of “Sinicization of the West”, there had been a lot of related practice. It's not so much a theory of “Sinicization of the West”, but a summary of Gao Xingjian's dramatic spirit.) Gao Xingjian was a practitioner, thinker as well as creator when the script was originally created. In this kind of thinking and creation, the concept of “Sinicization of the West” was put forward which was essentially different from the idea of “adapting foreign things to Chinese needs”. It is mainly based on Chinese opera, which made use of the advantages of Western dramas to reform. The idea of “adapting foreign things to Chinese needs” sounds like a way to retain the national characteristics of drama. But in fact, it just puts the western drama on an inappropriate Chinese style coat. This concept is farsighted, as Ye Tingfang said that the general awakening of modern or contemporary aesthetic consciousness requires a long process [5]. When most people in the 1980s were still obsessed with Stanislavsky's theory of drama and Ibsen's realistic problem drama, Gao Xingjian began to break the old concept of drama appreciation and created a new aesthetic of drama. Although in the history of art, there are many failing examples of creating new aesthetics, Gao Xingjian, with his solid theory, serious thinking and tireless creation and summary, has become one of the few recognized lucky ones in the history of creating new aesthetics.

3. Avant-Garde Dramas of Gao Xingjian Has the Advantage of Nationality

Although Gao Xingjian experienced a period of hindrance and confusion in the national appeal of drama, he has always been able to adhere to the integration of Chinese opera and Chinese folk art into drama. It is inevitable for him to realize that avant-garde drama has certain advantages in terms of nationality. As Zhang Yi said, “he picked up the freedom of time and space from Chinese opera, and the freedom of singing, speaking, acting and acrobatic fighting. He achieved the spirit and left its form.” [6]

3.1 From the Virtuality of Traditional Opera to the Form Freedom of the Avant-Garde Drama

Chinese opera has always been famous for its comprehensiveness, stylization and virtuality, among which virtuality has always been praised by modern dramatists. Its virtuality is not only influenced by the ancient sacrifice culture, but also by the lack of funds of the poor folk troupes, and the traditional Chinese freehand thinking. In Zhouyi, Xici showed that: “the Confucius said: ‘the sage sets up an image to fulfill his meaning. On the stage of opera, the treatment of space and time has its own particularity, while the assumption of stage space is almost unlimited. It breaks the life space-time, which can be virtual, real, movable, static, near or far. It is said that “three or five steps show the world and six or seven actors performed a million soldiers”, or even “the cause of a thousand years is performed in an instant and the vast territory is reflected on a few feet of stage.” This kind of space-time structure with unique aesthetic value not only makes the best use of the limited space and compact time on the stage, but also makes the audience more focused on the plot in the limited time. The advantages of Chinese opera’s virtuality are also well applied to the avant-garde drama.

Gao Xingjian also realized the advantages of space-time freedom brought by the virtuality of Chinese opera. In the original creation of *Absolute Signal*, he divided the space-time of the whole drama into “memory, reality and imagination”. Through these three parts, he separated the time of five characters on the train. The changes of “recollection, reality and imagination” are the most obvious in three figures of trumpet, sunspot and honeybee girl. In the continuous running of the train, the story is explained and the feelings are expressed through the memory of the past and the imagination of the future of the above three young figures. In some sense, *Absolute Signal* is in line with the requirements of “Classical Unities” in western drama (These stories happened to five persons on a running train). However, the addition of virtuality expands the space-time and completes the narrative. While conforming to the “Classical Unities”, it also makes a breakthrough and development. It makes the memories, imagination and reality plots that originally broke the “Classical Unities” appear in the same space-time in combination with the characteristics of virtuality of Chinese opera.

Virtuality is also well reflected in the *Station*. Although the time and space in *Station* is not as remarkable as that in *Absolute Signal*, the setting of stage is still influenced by the virtual scenery of Chinese opera stage. The stage instruction of *Station* wrote: “the iron railings (of the station) are in a cross shape, with different lengths at the ends of the east, the west, the north and the south. There is a kind of symbolic meaning, which may mean a crossroad, a turning point on the road of life, or a station on the way of each character’s life.” This kind of symbolic stage props is basically common in Chinese opera. On the stage of opera, artists use some neutral scenes and simple props to show a variety of situations. These neutral scenes have no practical significance, reducing the limitations of actors’ performance and broadening the space of audience imagination. The symbolic iron railings in *Station* and neutral scenes on the stage of opera are of the same beauty. Although Gao Xingjian once gave some meanings to the symbolic scene in his creation, what the scene represented and implied in the drama still needs the director, actor and audience to create twice or even three times in order to import new meanings. In addition to the virtual stage layout, the “silent man” in the play is also with symbolic meaning. Although the character is silent with no monologue, it is this kind of blank that leaves more space for communication with the audience.

The virtuality of Chinese opera makes it get rid of the burden of “things”. To be more modern and meaningful, Chinese avant-garde drama is required to strengthen the communication between actors and audiences. It is the best choice to learn from the virtuality of Chinese opera. While Gao Xingjian chose the virtuality, he inevitably abandoned the fetter of stylization to the avant-garde drama.

3.2 From the Comprehensiveness of Opera to the Comprehensive Art with “Multi Vision” in the Avant-Garde Drama

The comprehensiveness of Chinese opera is also recognized by Gao Xingjian. The representative of the comprehensiveness of Chinese opera is the ability to sing, speak, act and play, which is the

most attractive on the stage. According to Gao Xingjian, singing, speaking, acting and playing are also of relatively independent aesthetic value. In addition to opera, Chinese traditional art also includes acrobatics, magic, puppets, crosstalk and so on, which can be used by the avant-garde drama.

Savage may be said to be the work that has realized Gao Xingjian's dream. In the west at that time, most dramas were stage plays with words. *Savage* combines the advantages of virtuality and opera performance. The artistic forms in the play range from Nuo dance to logging dance, from mask performance to national recitation. From the beginning of *Savage*, there are gongs and drums, then the old singers and helpers begin to sing. More and more characters appear in the script, who often talk in the form of singing or multi voice recitation. Gao Xingjian not only picked up the comprehensive advantages of Chinese opera, but also actively added modern scientific and technological factors into the creation of *Savage*, such as sound, light, color, so that *Savage* can really get rid of the set pattern that drama is all about dialogues. Gao Xingjian himself wrote in the advice and explanation of performance in *Savage*: "Drama needs to recover many artistic means it lost in more than a century."

In *Absolute Signal*, Gao Xingjian also applied some steps in Chinese opera to describe the flexible actions of car bandits. In Chinese opera such as *Sanchakou*, all actors are proficient in singing, speaking, acting and playing. Those are Gao Xingjian needs in the development of comprehensive art with "multi vision". Drama with simple dialogues is boring, with no more advantages over the films and TV in 1980s. It is a kind of innovation of Gao Xingjian to develop the comprehensive art with "multi vision" of the avant-garde drama from the comprehensiveness of opera. To some extent, it is also a kind of "retro". After all, drama was a comprehensive art from the beginning, but gradually became a stage speaking art. The drama with comprehensive art with "multi vision" not only inherits the Chinese opera culture, but also makes it different from movie and TV. While Gao Xingjian innovated the drama, he always thought about the survival of drama.

4. Loss of Gao Xingjian's National Consciousness in the Avant-Garde Drama

Although Gao Xingjian's works are of obvious explorative and national characters, there are bound to be gains and losses in the process of exploration. The main loss lies in that too many elements are integrated into the drama to be fully expressed. There are excessive elements in Gao Xingjian's scripts, mainly reflected in the following two points.

4.1 From Single Theme to "Polyphony" Theme

Gao Xingjian's plays also face a huge test to be solved, which is the problem of his existing plays' bearing of more complex and broader living capacity. Most of Chinese opera is about a main theme, which is divided into beginning, climax, development and ending, so that a major theme in the play will be fully and comprehensively displayed on the stage. Although Gao Xingjian's polyphony dramas, with *Savage* as the representative of multi themes and multi parts, represent the variety of life, within a few hours of performance, the capacity and bearing capability of the drama stage for the theme of script are limited. The application of polyphony theme needs further thinking and exploration.

4.2 From Three-Dimensional Figures to Group Images

Absolute Signal, *Station* and *Savage*, which are mainly explored in this paper, are a process of witnessing the increasing number of characters in Gao Xingjian's plays. From five characters in *Absolute Signal* to more than 40 characters in *Savage*, the unlimited increase of characters leads to the lack of three-dimensional characterization in a limited time. It is not because Gao Xingjian's insufficient capacity, but because some characters are not suitable for the plot. If the character fits the plot, a few words will shape a person well. Although *Savage* has achieved the goal of comprehensive art with "multi vision", it set too many roles. In addition to Gao Xingjian's exploration with some deviations, it was also closely related to the limited comprehensive actors of Chinese drama at that time. The creation of group figures in Chinese opera mainly depends on

music and virtuality. There are only two main actors on the stage in the scene of duel of War in Wan City. While with solid playing foundation, actors created the atmosphere of the war with their performance and the tense and fast gongs and drums. Such a setting highlights the characters and reduces the audience's understanding burden. Too many characters in the drama bring great difficulties to the editing, directing, acting and viewing.

5. Conclusion

Gao Xingjian's plays left in the drama history of the 1980s are both of the necessity of exploration and inheritance. Starting from the traditional Chinese drama, he explored and pursued all the way and constantly displayed the aesthetic interest of China on the stage of drama, which has influenced the creation of many contemporary dramas. From a certain aspect, the works of the new generation of drama creators who have been influenced by Gao Xingjian's drama are more or less with national characteristic. Although a small number of people held that Gao Xingjian's dramatic form is over the content, there are many kinds of high praise in academic discussion.

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