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# STAGING LU XUN IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE THEATRE THE AESTHETICS OF MORALITY IN RETHINKING VERSIONS OF REALITY ON THE EXPERIMENTAL STAGE

## **Abstract**

The paper investigates the aesthetic modes in which Chinese writer Lu Xun has been staged in China throughout the last century, and how the performing of such powerful symbol of Chinese modernity redefines the concept of realism within the contemporary Chinese performance discourse. At present, the theatre scene experiments with a multitude of possible social realities which are of a moral condition, meant to redirect Chinese decayed social realities on a path to self-awareness and self-discovery of the beauty of morality. Rising state-powered Neoconfucianism, meant to revive patriotism and a sense of morality among the Chinese youth, theatre makers manage to challenge its genuinity through a much more authentic approach to redefining the human soul, a cause at stake for contemporary Chinese theatre.

**Keywords:** Chinese avant-garde, Chinese theatre, Lu Xun, realism, postdramatic theatre

## **Lu Xun and the Chinese spoken drama theatre. An introduction:**

During the last couple of years, contemporary Chinese experimental theatre has been challenged by cutting-edge plays that criticize the decayed Chinese moral landscape, doomed, in the words of Chinese theatre makers, by the “happy union between two evil forces”: “western money worship cult and eastern totalitarianism” (Wang, 2016: XIX) The fear of “losing our national intelligence, humanity and soul” (Wang, 2016: XVIII) caused by the brutal intrusion is so great, that non-commercial theater, in its most extreme ways, embarked on a moral cruise of re-formulating, within the limits of censorship, new aesthetic forms of social criticism; they are all

meant to re-beautify reality through an artistic understanding and living of life.<sup>1</sup>

Reinventing Lu Xun<sup>2</sup> on stage, as a way of responding to the challenges brought by the perpetual disintegration of moral values in the context of modernity is not, however, just a recent trend. Only three years after Lu Xun's death, in 1939, director Huang Zuolin 黄佐临 (1906-1994) and Chen Mengshao 陈梦韶 brought Lu Xun on stage in an attempt to both canonize and humanize this revolutionary figure, emblematic for defining China's troubled modernity. Ever since, Lu Xun has been constantly reinvented within the realm of theatre, from a mainly mimetic-realist mode to more and more daring experimental forms; this constant switch of Lu Xun's theatrical representations attest to and reflect the permanent changing socio-cultural Chinese landscape and the historic contingencies that push theatre on a path to complex modernization and of redefining its epistemic structure.

My study makes a hermeneutical investigation into different modes in which Lu Xun and his literary legacy have been adapted to stage from the end of the Republican China, at the end of the thirties, up to the present time. I will focus especially on how these very different versions of Lu Xun, constructed by directors belonging to various generations, reflect the cultural chronotopes of their staging background, as well as the fluctuating concept of realism, so dear to the Chinese theatre makers. The main part of my analysis emphasizes nevertheless the work of Chinese *New Theatre Wave* 新浪潮 director Wang Chong, initiator of *Th  tre du R  ve Exp  rimental* 薪传实验剧<sup>3</sup> and an emblematic figure for the new aesthetic trends characterizing the independent theatre visions in contemporary China. Analyzing from a comparative East-West aesthetics paradigm Wang's staging of *The Great Master* 大先生<sup>4</sup>, I argue that the director manages to come up with a renewed way of constructing the multiple versions of theatrical realities that juxtapose trans-historically politics and everyday life on the question of Chinese society lack of moral integrity.

Wang's theatre aesthetic quest is not about realism *per-se*, nor is it limited to a local Chinese specific type of realism, but about how global audiences may interpret it and endow it with sense, in a world in which there is no clear-cut demarcation line between what is real and what is not. "It is not about the spoken words, it is not about realism. It is all about what are the world's problems and the sophisticated ways in which we can understand our world" states Wang in one of his in an interview from 2015<sup>5</sup>; he manages to implement theatre techniques that make the

old versions of Ibsenite morality conceptualizations of Lu Xun on stage succumb to a much more genuine and complex understanding of the paradoxes and multi-angled perspectives from which the Chinese writer and reality itself need to be explored. Shooting and staging at the same time, adopting a multimedia perspective of representing the reality, Wang proposes hybridized products of postdramatic techniques that catalyze on the beauty-morality symbolic interrelation that define the Chinese traditional aesthetics.

### **Realism and tradition in Chinese modern theatre**

Before making a short incursion into the plain realist plays that have characterized the staging of Lu Xun throughout the last century, it is important to clarify the hermeneutical conceptualizations of cultural realism in China.<sup>6</sup> Ever since the May 4<sup>th</sup> movement, realism, in its naturalistic understanding, has been viewed as the liberating and national salvation and emancipation tool. At the beginning of the Republic, literary realism was responding to the social necessity of China's epistemic reinvention; realism represented a way of redefining the revolutionary self, as well as the concept of 'freedom'. During Mao's era (1949-1976), realism meant pure reflection of reality destined to serve common people or propagandistic aims, originating into the Soviet type of socialist realism.<sup>7</sup> In the eighties and the nineties, realism switched to be a way of diverting the self from social realism, taking a much more individualized understanding of the personal experience.<sup>8</sup> During the last decade, realism embarked on a more political interventionist stance. The concept underwent a massive conceptual transformation and turned into "realist spirit", namely the ability of the human mind to get the essential, abstract framing of pluri-realities defining the new cosmopolite world. The new version of realism, which is the engine of Wang Chong's *The Great Master* play "truly faces the inner side, observes the world independently and reveals true feelings about the world." (Wang Chunchen 2011: 75). In one word, as it is reflected within the theatre of young rebellious Chinese directors as well, reality in its artistic forms is only an "interpretation" and "representation" of what we make of it. Realism in contemporary China is a psychological necessity opposed to the destabilizing forces of every-day life controlled by technology and neoliberal values. No matter how experimental he gets, Wang Chong's theatre embrace of reality is a

way of “exploring and responding to the culture of the artificial” (Ulrike Garde 2013: 179). Wang simultaneously exploits the interaction between media, multimedia, the symbolic characters on stage and the audience, to come up eventually to a realization of what real people in an artificial world are like. He challenges the audience to make the difference between genuine and non-genuine, to trigger or rediscover their lost inner sense of a moral but non-dogmatic self. The audience is thus endowed with the very important purpose of “creating authenticity” (Garde 2013: 186) or rediscovering it in a fresh, even attractive light. Wang Chong and his theatrical vision which hybridizes formalistic theatricality with filmic intermedial techniques don’t solely aim at pushing the boundaries of new aesthetic forms in Chinese theatre, but also to make performance aesthetics capable of rendering and uncovering, through mediation, paradox and conflict, a clean-cut authentic self. As one notices in what follows, this self, brought forth by the staging of Lu Xun throughout the decades, is being equated with two principles very dear to Chinese literati ever since China’s first entanglements with modernity: freedom<sup>9</sup> 自由 and soul 灵魂.

### **Short history of Lu Xun’s works stagings**

From the very first adaptation and staging of Lu Xun short stories, the concepts of freedom, emancipation and moral revolution were pervasively the dominant ones behind these performances. The only adaptation on stage of any of his work on stage during his lifetime is *The True Story of Ah Q* 阿 Q 正传 adapted by Chen Mengshao 陈梦韶 (1903-1984), published in six scenes and performed by a theatre group in Xiamen. Although the play was supposed to be accessible to the masses, in sync with the recurrent ideology regarding the usefulness of art, the director chose to stage it in the writer’s birthplace Shaoxing, stirring up even Lu Xun’s dissatisfaction. Chen’s adaptation was meant to be “representative for the proletariat and for the non-educated class. The people who really understand *AhQ* say he is a laborious worker, those who don’t say he’s a pickpocket. Those who know truly understand *AhQ* say he has got humanism, those who do not, say that he is obscene, those who really know him, say he is innocent, those who do not, say he is a thug who should die.” (Chen in Fan, 2009: 65) Just like the literary debates would support the concept of literature as reflection of reality with the aim of saving and strengthening the newly born Chinese state, theatre would

display a similar vision. After Lu Xun's death, Tian Han 田汉 was the first to adapt Lu Xun's work, which was again a version of *AhQ* published in 戏剧时代 *Theatre Times* (Vol. 1 Nr. 1-2) in 1937. Class struggle is the center theme of this play which mixes narratives from different other works of Lu Xun, such as *Kong Yiji*, *Homeland*, *Medicine*, *Diary of a Madman* etc.

If these first incipient adaptations are imbedded within the emerging Marxist ideologies of class struggle dominating the Chinese cultural narrative during the first decades of the last century, Hong Kong Cultural Department brought the play to another level and introduced the question of "the soul" 灵魂. *The Soul of People: Lu Xun* 民族魂鲁迅 is the name of the pantomime play staged in 1940 in Hong Kong the first to promote Lu Xun himself as main character, instead of his fictional characters.<sup>10</sup> The play brings together two important discourses essential for defining the following evolution trends in conceptualizing realism in Chinese theatre. Little by little, the existence of Lu Xun gets rid of its revolutionary stiff hero aura while embracing that of a flesh and blood human constructed on stage as a moral illuminator. The concept of moral self-engineering through a lucid attitude on life became more and more pervasive, transforming the Chinese infatuation with realism on stage into a space of social solidarity. "Theatre for the people"<sup>11</sup> 民族话剧 is a consequential narrative dominating the present cultural landscape of China, marred by atrocious consumerist understanding of life.

The 1981 version of *AhQ* directed by Chen Baichen 陈白尘 brought on stage yet another revolutionary vision of Lu Xun's cultural significance at the end of the century. Patriotic driven themes are inserted within the play and the dichotomy Chinese moral values-Western decayed ethics became a central theme of redefining the moral force of *AhQ*. Scene five, describing the horrific violence inflicted by "the foreign devils" on Zhao Taiye speaks volumes about the ideologies dominating the early eighties cultural Chinese landscape in China. Not far from this year, "the campaign against the spiritual pollution" brought on by excessive promotion of Western cultural values in China would kick off, reinforcing the self-victimization historical discourse that still defines the country's strategy of historical approach to its past two hundred years. Moreover, the play combined the 话剧 *huaju* spoken drama tradition with the Chinese traditional drama form of 戏曲 *xiqu*, in an obvious gesture of revitalizing the Chinese traditional culture, an attempt to make the native drama genres adapt to the needs of the contemporary Chinese society. What disturbs director Chen most, however, is the redefinition of the concept

of revolution, as he reiterates a prominent official and scholarly narrative, namely that the Chinese Republican revolution failed in its attempt of fully destroying tradition and adopting Western values. "The remaining evil from the feudal class, he says, stole the revolution (...) and they use its name to get closer to the poverty-stricken people." (Chen in Gu 1981: 6).

In 2001 Zhang Guangtian<sup>12</sup> (b. 1966) 张广天 brought forth a very risky version of Lu Xun's life in his unconventional musical play *Mister Lu Xun* 鲁迅先生. Just like other previous plays, Zhang's mixed aspects of Lu Xun's biography with aspects of his works, which resulted into a revolutionary performance, reflecting the director's leftist leanings. At the beginning of the new millennium, Marxist "revolutionary spirit" would define the postcolonial Chinese discourse, one which opposed the organic structure of Confucian morality to the commodified values of the West. Zhang Guangtian explained that "the audience wanted to experience a Lu Xun that we had created together". Hence, "what appears on stage is most definitely not Lu Xun, but rather an aspect of each person's inner sense of justice." (Davies, 2013: 324) Critics often stigmatized the play for its heavy commercial, market-oriented aspects, while the revolutionary spirit, Zhang claimed to have created seemed for them little convincing. It is possible, however, that most of critics were not ready yet to see the canonical figure of Lu Xun at the center of an experimental play, set on de-canonizing and, to a certain extent, trivializing, the saint aura of China's most emblematic modernity figure. Zhang Guangtian's mission with the play was, however, to destroy the mystic, hero-like aura of the Master, to humanize him, to shock, to give a moral lesson to the intellectual elites who often positioned themselves to the writer in accordance to what the political tides would see as orthodox or not: "I have directed *Mister Lu Xun* in order to poke fun at people, to piss off certain people, which is in fact my profession: pissing people off." says Zhang in an interview in 2006 for *China Newsweek*, complaining about the double standards that characterized the intellectuals' embrace of Lu Xun during the Cultural Revolution:

What is getting on my nerves is that in the seventies, some people used to be ardent admirers of Lu Xun; afterwards, they have noticed some new trends, so they started to judge him. I don't want to hear these voices, but the Red Guards belong to this kind of gang of accusers. So they have damaged Lu Xun, so I sing him and glorify him even by using *gaodaquan*. I shamelessly declare him to be good. I want to make these people feel

ashamed with themselves. I have conceived this play under the form of epic theatre *shishiju* and I am sure you don't want to see this kind of play". I am sure you don't find this kind of language appropriate for describing the Cultural Revolution. I want to enact that language and show it to you. If Mister Lu Xun is only superficial and essentialized, what has that got to do with me? All I care about is that these people are pissed now, they suffer, so I am happy. (...) They now started to reconsider Lu Xun. (...) Lu Xun has always fought against servility and, in the end, we have become his lackeys or we have become the lackeys of slanderous people. An independent fighter has never inspired his comrades, but won the applauses of thousands of audiences and their support, which is exactly the tragedy of Lu Xun. (*Zhongguo Xinwen Zhoukan* 2006 (41) :32)

Staging Lu Xun's life through orchestra, choruses and a mix of traditional Chinese music genres was for Chinese theatre an aesthetic novelty. The ideological political statement behind this play prevails nevertheless over its form and artistic value. Zhang clearly divides the characters on stage into morally good and bad. The positive ones, such as those depicting Xu Guangping, Liu Hezhen, Feng Xuefeng or Rou Shi<sup>13</sup> always interpret traditional folk songs while the negative ones perform traditional folk opera songs. Such an obvious division between good and evil, new and old, morality and immorality was not at all a novelty within the Chinese theatre praxis. Even so, most of the traditional audience found the play too unconventional and loose. Despite all conflicting reviews of the play, Zhang Guangtian "investigates, gives you headaches, he is experimenting and is thinking deeply", while the musical construction of the performance aims at "advocating simplicity" and "letting the music enter peoples' hearts". (Xiong 2001: 7-8).

Zhang's version was arguably the first play in which Lu Xun gets humanized features to his heroic figure, making room for other directors to engage more seriously on this project and construct a much more vibrant, real character, relevant for present China, as it is the case with female dramaturg Zheng Tianwei's 郑天伟 and her play *Impermanence, The hanging woman* 无常, 女吊. The play was staged also in 2001 at Beijing People's Art Theatre 北京人艺小剧场 and it mixes parts of Lu Xun relevant short stories, such as *The Wine Shop, The Story of the Hair, Impermanence, The Hanging Woman*. The high level of abstract representation of the performance prompted the critics to pinpoint it as "an existentialist play, exploring the depths of human life" and "offering a contemporary philosophical perspective on life and death." (Shan 2001:6) The ideological aim of the

play was to “reflect the cultural landscape that defines history and reality”, while the character of Lu Xun himself “has got a deep sense of the absurd”. (Shan 2001: 66-67)). From a dramaturgical point of view, the language is beautiful, limpid and simple. The main characters, recycled from Lu Xun’s works, Jiansheng and Zijun are fully adapted to the needs of the contemporary world, estranged from the literal meaning that Lu Xun has originally endowed them with. The quest for moral beauty springing out from the characters’ dialogue, their philosophical dissection of life, are however allusive to Lu Xun’s quest for the self in a surgeon-like manner, as the following monologue on behalf of Juan Sheng highlights:

I am a human being too, a simple human being. But they take me for a fool. Wait for me to become a real fool indeed and they will consider me a fool yet again; not only human being but a great human being; what people think of as virtuous is depriving the world of real virtue. I really don’t know what year, what month, what day, this world of no virtues will come to an end.<sup>14</sup> (in Shan 2011: 8)

The first part of the new millennium has indeed been marked by the rise of Neoconfucian morality, as a strategy of battling Western powers’ cultural hegemony<sup>15</sup>. What Zheng’s play manages to do though is to let aside Zhang Guangtian’s patriotic leftist obtuseness and to combine, without fearing to lose the Chinese cultural identity, patterns of both Confucian and Western morality. The characters questioning of the moral sense of the world has got existentialist value but the heightened emotional perspective adds on a touch of beauty specific to the Chinese definition of beauty, like this short monologue of Jiansheng, who complains about the pressure poverty puts on love: “Poverty and hunger are like chlorinated lime. Always floating, it is like the deep purple of love until it changes into pale red and from pale red to white.” (Shan 2001:67) Director Wang Yansong 王延松 specifically claims his infatuation with Western existentialism that he tries to adapt to the Chinese cultural landscape and societal needs. He endows it with more optimism and draws on the somber, grotesque background of Lu Xun’s short stories a silver-lining reminiscent of Chinese construction of black humor, which is a blend of despair and hope. The director tries hard, as he himself admits, to divert this “absurd comedy” 荒诞喜剧 “from the Western sense of absurd”: “The characters in the play have a pretty happy disposition”, he states, “and it is hard to categorize them.” (Shan 2001:8) The mix of hope and hopelessness, which is crucial for the construction

of a Chinese sense of dark humor, is another trait of the play: “I hope that the audience will watch most of the play in silence. I also need the audience’s laughter, but not that kind of joyful, innocent laughter (...) and I hope that after laughing, the audience will have more complex feelings.” (Shan, 2001:6-7) It is also interesting how this version of *The Hanging Woman* deals aesthetically with the question of separating reality from a dreamlike world, tracing the demarcation line between the palpable here and now and the world of ghosts. The entrance for the audience inside the theatre is marked through a door on the top of which hangs written the following sign: “ghost entrance” 魂门关. Entering the ghost door marks not just the realm of Chinese tradition, which saw within the occult an occasion for clarifying and reestablishing the adequate ethics within the mortal world. The ghost world is also a more distinct projection of reality and of what realism is supposed to mean in contemporary China. It is the tension between what is imagined as reality and what reality is, in fact, and what one can do in order to readjust this reality to our primary sense of adequate understanding. The decorum also recreates a natural landscape populated by both human beings and their *alter-egos* in the shape of lucid ghosts, or, in the words, of the Chinese critic, “the *qi* of the ghosts covers up and disguises the depressed human heart”. (Shan, 2001:67) The play was meant to trigger “spiritual shock” among the audience, who was more used with a commercial type of theatre exposure.

In 2010, in Hong Kong, Olivia Yan comes with a new version of Lu Xun, this time again through the voice of his most emblematic character, *AhQ*. Yet again, *AhQ* became the symbol of the moral revolution needed by the Chinese society. The main character mixes in commercial fashion a post-dramatic type of comedy, in which the characters are being half modern in terms of clothing, while their faces are painted following the Shaoxing Opera principles, white, the symbol of deceiving, being the predominant color. The play’s synopsis turns *AhQ*’s multi-faceted persona into a type of survival experience, linked to present society issues of alienation:

*AhQ* or rather the remnants of *AhQ* lives here. The revolution has ended (or has it?) Some say he has not died. He has changed his appearance and made his fortune in the city. Some say he cannot die, he has become a monk... Amituofuo. Some say he is a revolutionary hero! A statue has been erected in his village. Go see it! Some say he impregnated a woman who delivered quadruplets, looking exactly like him. Some say he has never existed: he is but a fictitious character invented by an irritating writer by the name of Lu Xun<sup>16</sup>. (Olivia Yan 2011).

Finally, in 2012, Li Jianjun<sup>17</sup> (b. 1978) 李建军 comes with an experimental performance of “A madman’s diary” 狂人日记 aimed at being performed in small theatre venues and at challenging completely the concepts of real and reality in theatre. The diary’s entries are performed as dialogues or monologues while the chorus and singers are narrating the epic line of the story, reminiscent of the Greek tragedy chorus and of traditional *Chuanqi* opera. “The confrontation between the struggling madman and the masses” is yet another comment on China’s decaying moral landscape and people’s need to rationalize it. The experimental form of the play, although modernizing while also empowering the Chinese contemporary theatre field, triggered quite heavy criticism for its heightened level of conceptualism and hyper-stylized performance praxis, hard to be grasped by a general audience. Yan Liu simplistically dismisses the play as “something that China does not really need” (Wen 2012: 56), pleading for a more understandable and traditional type of theatre, one that “benefits the inner organs” (57). The play is characterized by strong physicality, as it is the case within the postdramatic theatre canon, as if to attest, just like director Li displays in his performative construction, that “The physical body is the point of interaction and frontline between ourselves, as individuals, and the outside world.” (Zhao, Huber 2014: 108). Li stands for the idea of spiritual freedom through the struggles of the madman, a type of freedom that he clearly dislocates from the pseudo-freedom brought forth by consumption or heightened eroticism.

### **Staging Lu Xun and its contribution to rethinking a neorealist performance praxis in China**

In conclusion, the eighty years of continuous staging of Lu Xun uninterruptedly redefine the Chinese understanding of theatrical reality and the fluctuant ideologies characterizing its dynamics. From mimetic reality, at the beginning of the Republic, theatre switches to a more and more abstract understanding of it, along with the historical changes and challenges that China undergo along almost a century of political turmoil. The contemporary scene, avid for even more reality on stage, stylizes the concept and equates it with a return to morality through beauty, and an artistic understanding of moral life. Theatre’s conceptualization of reality always fluctuates in accordance with the Western theatre scholarship, challenging the Chinese dramatic landscape, from Artaud’s

theatre of cruelty to Grotowsky's ritual theatre, the French and Russian avant-garde or Robert Wilson's Zen Buddhism grasping of artificiality as a way to approach reality on stage. However, Chinese theatre makers never give up on tradition, and that is not a simple political agenda derived from postcolonial frustrations, as one might easily think. Chinese independent theatre scene is faced with the emerging and appropriations of Western avant-garde techniques of representing reality adapted to the Chinese continuous shifting realities; this trend is doubled by the need of aesthetically conceptualizing the reality of performance within a moral framework and within rhizomic<sup>18</sup> East-West reasoning of interpretations.

### **Wang Chong's *The Great Master* and the many versions of contemporary China**

A new "aesthetic of the soul"<sup>19</sup> disguising sensitive political issues arises within the forms of most daring avant-garde theatre forms, as it is the case of Wang Chong's directing of *The Great Master* 大先生, written by Li Jing 李静 and put on stage by the latter in 2016 at the National Theatre in Beijing. The play has been staged nine times before being censored and its production stopped abruptly. The play has got indeed strong political connotations; the background is dominated by an immobile statue alluding to a faceless Chairman Mao, on the top of which lies a huge screen projecting real-time edited images shot on stage, while the actors are interpreting their roles. The whole performance is thus being surveyed by the gigantic screen which selectively displays certain details from within the actual action. But unlike other of Wang Chong's plays, in which a whole cinematic crew is working on stage while the actors perform their part, in *Da Xiansheng* there is only one shadow-catcher cameraman, leaving the stage clear and easy to follow.

It is obviously easy to politicize this play, given that the script is filled with metaphors alluding to the idea of revolution, freedom and soul.<sup>20</sup> The pervasive and overwhelming screen has a double role: society surveillance and authoritarian powers are being subverted by the audience failing to grasp where the demarcation line between reality and non-reality lies. In other words, the real-artificial blurring line dominates and destabilizes the violent reality hiding within the symbolism of Mao-surveillance screen-like figure. The many layers and versions of reality undermine the controlling powers dominating the Chinese society, caricaturing its

inflexibility and exposing its monstrous nature. "Digital technologies, together with neoliberal economic relations have given birth to radically new ways of manipulating and articulating lived experience." (Shapiro 2010: 2); in Wang Chong's case, his unique use of technology means at destabilizing, through intermediality and juxtaposing of film and theatre the fixity and lack of flexibility of socio-political forces dominating China; Wang does so by contrasting them with the multiplicity and various ways of questioning and searching for the essence of reality.

The political understanding of Lu Xun on the background of contemporary China can not be questioned indeed; but this obvious vision comprising Wang Chong's and dramaturg Li Jing's representation of nowadays China through Lu Xun goes also beyond the intention of a fierce political statement and brings forth a very mature "aesthetics of social engagement"<sup>21</sup>; it is rather an aesthetic of the soul that breaks the doctrine lines of Neoconfuciansim and delve into its deepest emotional side. *Da Xiansheng* scrutinizes the question of soul within a tricky political context, a theme very recurrent within many forms of independent Chinese contemporary theatre. Li Ning's 李凝 *Dictionary of the Soul* 灵魂词典 staged at The Wuzhen Festival in 2016 or Li Jianjun's *One beautiful Day* 美好的一天 staged at *Penghao Theatre* in Beijing in 2014 bring forth a type of living aesthetics engaged with rethinking, in a genuine manner, the question of morality. The concept of soul *xinling* 心灵, that the young independent directors explore in their plays, represents the core part of their aesthetic staging practices; the assault of morality within the contemporary avant-garde performance scene is the result of artists' purpose to form up a valid civil society through theatre, to deconstruct the hypocritical discourse on harmony and reconstruct a genuine one instead, able to make the Chinese theatre a true space of social solidarity. This emerging aesthetic of the soul is a variation of the ecocriticism discourse that took Chinese arts and academic thinking by storm within the last two decades; central is no more our relationship with man-brutalized nature, but our relation with ourselves and the community around.

Director Wang strives to reconstruct a new Chinese soul by going back to the moral quality of beauty, by "finding the roots of morality and beauty in the power of judgement and its reflective function" (Helmut 2006:105). The nation and soul-saving project is not didactic in nature, despite the fact that the director takes an utilitarian take on life.

The fact that Wang Chong chooses Lu Xun to explore and recalibrate the dynamics of a new Chinese soul, politically and socially engaged, is

no coincidence; as it has been exemplified in the first half of the paper, *The Great Master* represents the ideological shift of Chinese generation as regarding the moral condition of China throughout the entanglements of history and politics. The figure of Lu Xun is directly related to the new wave of nation-defining narrative among the Chinese youth nowadays; Lu Xun represents an alternative voice of freedom within a cyberspace, a medium which could easily mislead youngsters into the mere illusion of freedom. Lu Xun is that counter-discourse that derides people's illusion of freedom and which triggers them to truthfully search for it inside their inner selves. Lu Xun is a discourse on freedom tolerated by the government, a narrative that theatre makers exploit massively in a subversive, yet enlightening manner. Yu Shicun synthetizes perfectly the importance Lu Xun has, along with foreign modes of theatre, in helping the Chinese new youth find their own independent voice:

When intellectuals are absent from the public life, when things happen but there is silence about it, except from the help from the French, English or German world, we, the common folk, borrow and use the language of Lu Xun, we imitate Lu Xun's words and speak up. This phenomenon not only lets the youngsters expand their ideas in writing but it is also an exercise for the young generation to assert themselves. (Yu 2016)

### **Playwright Li Jing and her political statement under the disguise of “revolution of the soul”**

In what follows I approach the play from a dramaturgic perspective, exploring the narrative procedures that playwright Li Jing adopts while producing a highly abstract, yet humanized vision of Lu Xun. Li comes up thus with a completely personalized understanding of Lu Xun, managing to bring humanness and familiarity to the writer whom she loves to paraphrase, as “China's most familiar stranger”. (Li 2015)

Despite the social acid commentary and allegorical nature of such performative reinvention, given how strongly Lu Xun is embedded into the Chinese consciousness of Lu Xun as a national orthodox hero, exploring him theatrically seems to be, officially, a safe practice. Re-canonizing Lu Xun seems however to reconstruct the aesthetic of a desirable Chinese soul that brings on stage the very basic ingredients for a genuine one:

freedom, sacrifice and love of the other. Although playwright Li Jing puts many wise-didactic words into her historic characters' mouths, the effect of this narrative strategy is reverse, namely, it destroys the lack of substance characterizing the bravado discourses of fabricated heroes. Li Jing goes straight to a much stronger heroic cord, humane and sensitive, left unexplored by the official discourse. The play takes place in the year of Lu Xun's death, 1936. At the very beginning, the audience witness Lu Xun dying, while his shadow parts with his body. This is the moment shadow catchers enter the stage and change Lu Xun old-fashioned scholarly clothes with a shirt, shoes and jeans and have him re-wander through different episodes of his life, emphasizing his relations with friends, ideological enemies or family. The focus is on a very complex language, which destroys ideological clichés. Playwright Li Jing does so by making characters speak in seemingly wooden language, but with a very emotional vibe attached, humanizing it. It is extraordinary indeed the way director Wang Chong contributes to giving authenticity to a monologue like the following one concerning the idea of sacrifice for the others:

Lu Xun: I'd rather betray myself than betray your tears. I'd hold them in my palms, I wouldn't let them drop down on voiceless ground. I wouldn't let one more tear drop down. This is my snake-poison vow. This is my crazy secret. *Da Xiansheng*, 22)

Monologues are mostly endowed with ideological meaning in this play, but the cadence of phrasing, the limpid words making up big emotional discourses clearly display themselves as "physical, motoric acts of speaking", "a self-evident process" of reciting (Lehman 2006: 147). A text brimming with emotional artificial slogans gets new life on stage, as if to expose its fabricated texture but also to extract from within its most visceral meaning, like this monologue depicting the gruesome death of the young revolutionary (Lu Xun as a child), performed by a very young actor no older than nine:

**Death executioner** (to the young man in black): On your knees! (The young man doesn't make a move nor does he say anything) On your knees! (The young man does not make a single gesture) I said on your knees! (He opens the fire, the young man falls on one knee. The executioner is agitating his hands in the air, and sings happily). The first bullet to your left foot, to make you kneel-down on one knee, trembling. (Fires) The second bullet,

on your right foot to make you fall on both knees, coughing. (The young man falls on both knees. (Fires) The third bullet, to your crotch (chuckles) so that your *yang* parts deprive you of a wife (Fires). The fourth bullet, to your belly! (Fires) The fifth bullet, to your heart, so that your heart may never burn. (Fires while dancing) The sixth bullet, to your throat, to make you hold up your brain. (As if reading, fires) The seventh bullet, to your left eye, so that you die staring at me. (Fire!) The eighth bullet to your right eye, so that I am the last person you ever remember. (Fire!) The ninth bullet, to your forehead, to leave you with a wound that turns you dumb. (Fire!)(...) (*Da Xiansheng*: 44)

“Words are floating in space by themselves” (Lehman 2006: 147) while the speaker of such violent acts becomes an irrelevant presence; that turns the text into something no more than “auditive structures” (Ibid) holding both political and personal fragmentary connotations. The calm and lack of affection with which the monologue is uttered makes it overcome the heaviness of a dramatic exploration in front of the audience, while its surprising artificiality brings it closer to the dehumanized psyche of the killer pronouncing them. It is in fact the paradox of articulating painfully violent texts in a horrifyingly calm artificial demeanor, and thus exposing their raw psychological structure. The same goes with the cynical but wannabe ethical remarks on behalf of the judge, who moralizes the death of the revolutionary young man:

**The Judge:** Determined to fight for freedom? But in the end who lost his freedom? Who’s the one falling on his knees, brains smashed all over? You! You, young man! Holding a flag beautifully written on, you came threatening and attacking my chair, thinking that overthrowing my chair would restore freedom. You were wrong, you innocent young man! Chairs can’t change! The only ones that change are the people standing on these chairs and those kneeling before them. Keeping this chair is like keeping a desert island in the middle of a sea of wronged ghosts. This isle can never sink, bones and skeletons are raising its altitude. I’m sitting right on this island which means you lost. And I won. (...) I’m only a puppet. Yes, a puppet. And you must forgive puppets. And understand them. (*Da Xiansheng* 43)

Slogans, emotional statements and crass theatricality turn into genuine feelings that challenge the audience to think them over and scrutinize not the characters on stage, but themselves. Wang reaches this effect through the intermedial use of camera on stage, mediating the plethora of emotions

at stake through an abundance of images that ultimately challenge the audience's self-moral reconsiderations. When the revolutionary young man gets killed in gruesome manner, what is being edited on the big Mao-portrait shaped screen dominating the stage is Lu Xun's close-up shock at the site. There's a clearly moralizing issue at stake in this choice, but a sense of deep sadness and awareness of humanity's precarious condition displaces the lack of authenticity of a regular moral discourse:

**Lu Xun:** Trust me, this is paradise. Everything is ok...whoever tells you that, don't trust him, even if that person is me. On the contrary, that should make you realize you have arrived into the worst of hells. You have lost the right to question it because it is heaven. You have lost the right to oppose it, because it is heaven. This kind of phrase can only support those people loving chairs. I scrutinize myself deeply in a void mirror. But no, the mirror is not void. I can see you and you and you in my eyes. (...) You can throw over the chair of guilt but you can't find a pretext to grab it and sit on it again. Children, bare that in mind. (he dies)

**The fatty:** How stupid!

**The skinny:** Indeed, nothing but a bag of bones. (*Da Xiansheng*, 78)

There is no camera intermediality performed during the above monologue picturing the death scene of Lu Xun. As if director Wang wanted to tell his audience, for the first time throughout the performance, that what you see is what you get. The last part of the play, filled with ideological and moral discourses has no need any longer to recompose its multidimensional perspectives through intermediality. One is left with the impression of witnessing a classical piece of theatre. Again, this is an illusion, a trick, and intermediality starts inoculating the mind of the audience, who may now see certain details and perspectives of the reality on stage without the help or on behalf of the director. The reality of Lu Xun's death or Lu Xun's soul revolution is now seen maturely through the eyes of the audience who might have already gotten the core learning lesson of this play. It is a play about self-discovery through the humanization of an ossified hero and about what one might do with this self-discovery in real life, outside the theatre. Lu Xun's monologue might be filled with moral slogans hard to convince but it is precisely their assumed theatricality that makes them meaningful; his very last words are not signs sent to the audience, but shared feelings of compassion. The intermedial camera on stage disappears because there are no more spectators to the play. Everyone is involved in it, the audience, the actors, the technical

crew, the gigantic screen which turns off and regains its static, unmovable position, everyone is active part of the play now.

Wang's Lu Xun is also a product of shared time in history. As the director claims, the technical staff of the play is comprised of people from three generations, each bringing their own contribution to the historic representation of the performance. But all the events, going back and forth through the stream of consciousness into different aspects of Lu Xun's biography are not mere facts, but what Lehman calls "images of contemplation" (Lehman 2006: 157), inviting the spectator to scrutinize them and invest them with personal meaning. Wang himself straightforwardly places his hopes on self-moral scrutinizing on behalf of the audience, as it was the case with other plays he has staged, such as *Ghosts 2.0*, an adaptation of Ibsen's work to Chinese realities: "I hope audiences will be introspective about humanity, after watching it" (Wang 2014)

The way Wang chooses to elaborate his performance through the means of puppets 傀儡, as opposed to Lu Xun's vulnerable flesh and blood persona, speaks volumes about the artistic purposes in patterning his characters this way. At a first glance, it might seem that Lu Xun's real body on stage is in dichotomy conflict with the artificiality of a human-made body, such as that of a puppet. But just like the projected real-time edited video images complement the stage performance in a *yin-yang* relationship, the flesh-and-blood body and that of the puppets complement each-other. Wang brings into stage multitudes of puppets, all very creative and energized by complex emotions. The semi-grotesque puppet depicting the mother of the young revolutionary, from the eyes of whom a pair of hands comes out gesticulating aggressively or Skinny's caterpillar body, the funny umbrella shaped body of Zhou Zuoren, symbolizing Lu Xun's brother liberal visions, or Fatty's ability to raise up his own head are all endowed with heavy political and psychological symbolism.

When the revolutionary young man gets killed, the caterpillar-like figure of Skinny surrounds his body criticizing his reckless courage, which is exactly the image chosen to be conveyed on camera, as well. Blurred images of China's recent history are unfolding in psychedelic fashion in the puppet's huge, alien-shaped eyes; it is a shocking image which builds upon the gigantic discrepancy between the puppets almost ridiculous shape and her power of featuring through the eyes a whole history of national cruelty. Skinny's caterpillar body is the repository of an entire century of violent Chinese history. Her long multi-legged body that

absurdly, and grotesquely surrounds the corpse of the young man killed by his own irrational revolutionary idealism. The calmness of this grotesque scene is also distancing the audience from the awareness of watching a real-time experience; stillness makes thus the audience aware of the process of constructing an artificial moment like this, through the help of intermediality. Still, emotions are real and it is the very artificiality of the scene that empowers its hard-to-tame revelatory feelings. The very thin line between virtual violence and real violence is perfectly rendered throughout the performance, whenever the camera chooses certain surprising aspects to be displayed on screen. Yet again, the virtual and real violence of this scene complement each-other.

The use of technology - although compared to other of Wang plays, is limited in *The Great Master* -, has also the purpose of destabilizing the sense of time and place. As stated before, in this play, Lu Xun is the product of three generations and his trans-historical complexity surfaces at any given time throughout the performance. Playwright Li Jing often states that her Lu Xun is a present day Lu Xun, a man any of us would like to talk to on the phone and confess their deepest thoughts and concerns. At a closer look, however, Lu Xun is a flesh and blood human being, a victim exposed to all vulnerabilities of China's recent history, as shown also in an interview with the director:

“What *The Great Master* is all about is if Lu Xun were still alive, if his ghost could look into the present Chinese history, how would he answer, how would he comment and judge, and what his vision would be. ... One may say that Lu Xun's spirit could continuously live up to the present day and what we can see on stage is exactly this spirit.” (Wang in Li Jing *Da Xiansheng*)

Time and space do not matter anymore also because the constructed figure of Lu Xun can be displaced by the audience needs or imagination to any Chinese social chronotope. The young man gets killed by bullets while what one sees on the screen is Lu Xun's painful grimaces, followed by Skinny's crawling body next to the corpse. “Media becomes” thus “visible as media” (Nebelink 2010: 225) and what derives from it is a surprisingly logical process. The performance-screening dislocation generates a process of thought-emotion relocation and then a feeling of self-awareness, which is the ultimate artistic goal of the play.

Most of the critical discourses analyzing the play, including that of the director and playwright, as well as academic ones raise the question of ‘soul’ 心灵 *xinling*, formed of body 肉体 *routi* and feeling 情感 *qinggan*,

as the ‘central theme of the play’ (Li 2015: 102). Li Jing goes as far as to state that 灵魂 *linghun*-soul is a concept still strange to the Chinese people as, she farther states, ‘from early childhood I have only heard the word “thing” 事 *shi* instead’. “This work is about the paradox of love and freedom”, it’s about sacrificial love similar to that of Jesus dying on the cross (79). Despite the Christian Messiah like figure of Lu Xun, the genuine reinterpretation and the reconstructing of a much more credible morality is rather based on old Chinese traditions that brings to question the 君子 *junren*, the nobleman who is modest and lucid in his relation with the other. Her reconfiguring of altruism is built on a Christian understanding of universal love; what Li Jing does is in fact to find a middle ground that builds on a paradox, that is perfect dialogue between heightened emotionalism and a rational lucid mind. The way Li Jing questions the morality of nowadays China thorough Lu Xun’s conceptualization as a contemporary human being hides, within notions like “soul” and “spirit”, subversive political criticism focused on China’s double standard political discourse on social equity, endowed with universal value.

Director Wang Chong redefines the question of soul as moral entity that fights constraints and refuses to turn into a puppet, thus getting obviously political in constructing the social symbolism of the play. Chairs are a pervasive symbol throughout the play, chairs that grow into the flesh of the characters. The very last scene preceding Lu Xun’s death shows the Great Master mounting on a ladder along Mao’s gigantic bust to his head, where he snatches the big chair which replaces the statue’s facial features and brains and throws it away. Only after eliminating the lust for power, may one discover the beauty of the soul, that Li Jing searches so avidly for throughout her courageous play. “Imagination of the soul” is another formula used by Lu Xun academic experts, this time, who analyze this play. The soul, in their vision, takes the shape of a mirror which reflects both the historic and the present social landscape of China. (*Da Xiansheng* 79). In the context of a heavy Neoconfucian moralizing narrative that dominates China’s contemporary reemergence of national emancipation in a global world, Li Jing’s work subverts these very narratives, attacking their lack of feeling. The hypocrisy between the beauty of the neo-leftist national building discourse and the cruel neoliberal reality is replaced by playwright Li and director Wang with an aesthetic of beauty that empowers the grotesque with emotions and makes palpable, on the Chinese stage, the transformative moral force of their politically disguised performance vision.

## **Conclusions:**

The fact that Lu Xun's life and works have been continuously reinvented and readapted to the constantly fluctuating needs of the Chinese society shows that his character has always been a catalyzer of Chinese modernity, which reinvents itself, within the realm of Chinese theatre again and again. From purely naturalistic displays of consciousness, as it was the case at the beginning of the last century, to commercialized forms or cutting-edge techniques meant to modernize the Chinese theatre, Lu Xun has been a disseminator of mind-opening ideas that help China recalibrate its theatre discourse on the global stage. As it is the case with Wang Chong's theatre praxis, the heavy intermediality of his plays that build up rhizome-like visions of Chinese history may not be a shockingly new technique within the postdramatic discourse on theatre. But the paradoxical ways in which Wang plays with notions of surveillance/reality/imagination of reality/desired reality/possible reality in a complementary manner, which aims at disturbing the audience and making them reach lucidity and rationality through an intellectual assault on emotion, is rather unique; it also goes back to Wang's cultural background, one dominated by meaning and emotion coming out of randomness, paradox and nonsense. It comes natural to all young directors discussed in this paper to bring forth their Zen Buddhist background into the play, even unconsciously, proving that tradition lies also in China's epistemological foundation, and therefore, in the every-day living practices and simple gestures.

The new Chinese independent theatre is thus making the youth realize that morality in theatre is not solely an abstract notion, but rather "as real and as palpable as gravity". (Billioud 2012) And this time around, Chinese theatre makers manage to keep perfect balance between artistry and moral engagement.

## NOTES

- 1 Wang Xiang 王翔 is the producer and artistic director of Nanluoguxiang Theatre Festival in Beijing, promoting the idea of “theatre of the people for the people”; The quoted passage is taken from his 2016 Festival “Manifesto”: *We Are Still Alive, Warmly, Nobly and Artistically*, in which Wang complains about the hard conditions of making independent theatre in China as well as about the invasion of commercialized plays, a phenomenon which needs to be cut off by a more active engagement with “matters of the soul” on stage.
- 2 Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881-1936) is “the father of Chinese modern literature” and deeply associated with the iconoclasm of May 4 Movement 1919;
- 3 The avant-garde theatre group in Beijing has been led by artistic director Wang Chong (b. 1982) promoting forms of intermedial, experimental theatre; he brings performance and real-time shooting and editing on stage, while exploring the many versions of reality.
- 4 大先生, personal translation *The Great Master*; in certain English reviews, the title can also be translated as *Mr. Big*. The play was staged nine times at Beijing National Theatre, but its production stopped in Shanghai due to censorship problems caused by its heavy political content.  
<http://english.cri.cn/7146/2015/11/02/3481s902315.htm>
- 5 See, for instance, Wang Dewei, *Fictional Realism in Twentieth Century China*, 1992 arguing for very diverse forms of realism developed in the fiction of Mao Dun, Lao She and Lu Xun.
- 6 See Bonnie S. McDougall’s *Mao Zedong’s Yan’an Talks on Literature and Art*, 1980; during the famous 1942 Yan’an Talks, art and literature are clearly stated to have mimetic representation of reality while literature was meant to be serving as a socialist propagandistic tool.
- 7 See Peter Button *Configurations of the real in Chinese Literary and Aesthetic Modernity*, Brill, 2009
- 8 In 2003 Yan Fu translated into Chinese *On Liberty* by John Stuart Mill, under the title 群己权界论 a work which greatly impacted China’s modernity and emancipatory nation saving ideals powered by the concept of freedom 自由.
- 9 More on the Hong Kong version in “Zhongguo xiandangdai huaju wutaishang de Lu Xun zuopin”, Fan Jiarong, *Wenhua Yishu Yanjiu*, 2009 (2): 5
- 10 Wang Xiang promotes the concept of theatre for the people carried on by his annual Nanluoguxiang Theatre Festival in Beijing.
- 11 Zhang Guangtian is a famous Chinese playwright and avant-garde musician, his most famous directed play being Che Guevara *Qie-Gewala*, in 2000, promoting anti-Americanization and new-leftist nationalist feelings. His play *Mister Lu Xun* is well documented in articles like “Zhang Guangtian: Lu Xun qishi genwo meiguanxi” *Zhongguo Xinwen Zhoukan*, 2006 (41) or “Zhang Guangtian: Lu Xun Xiansheng Tage lai”, *Xiju zhi jia* 2003

- <sup>13</sup> Each character represents Lu Xun's true love, his feminist students and his writer friend, who died at the hands of nationalists for holding leftist views.
- <sup>14</sup> Excerpt from Drama Literature *Xiju Wenxue*, "Xiaozhong de beiai, Kan Huaju Wu Chang, Nü Diaoyou gan", 2001 (12): 67
- <sup>15</sup> See for instance Paul S. Chong, *Postcolonial Imagination*, Hong Kong, 2014.
- <sup>16</sup> See *Shixian Juchang The Theatre practice* <http://www.practice.org.sg/en/past-performance/the-story-after-ah-q/> The play was staged in 2011 for The China Theatre Festival in Hong Kong.
- <sup>17</sup> Chinese avant-garde independent theatre director, founder of The New Theatre Youth Group 新青年剧团, whose plays such as *One Beautiful Day Meihao de yitian* or *A Madman's Diary* have participated at domestic and international theatre Festivals.
- <sup>18</sup> Reference to the rhizome structure of feeling debated by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980.
- <sup>19</sup> Artistic Director Wang Xiang, Dramaturg Li Jing, director and performer Li Ning are only a few of the voices shaping the independent contemporary theatre scene and coming up with the "aesthetic of the soul" concept, derived from the ecocritical narrative, which is very popular in China's academic field during the last 2 decades.
- <sup>20</sup> Although well received by the Chinese theatre critic reviewers, certain reviews criticize *Da Xiansheng* for being "too political" as Bei Xiaojing would state on his *weibo* account [http://www.weibo.com/2641162085/Dp7AQxK16?from=page\\_1005052641162085\\_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment#\\_rnd1500037184491](http://www.weibo.com/2641162085/Dp7AQxK16?from=page_1005052641162085_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment#_rnd1500037184491)
- <sup>21</sup> The aesthetic of engagement has been first recycled by Arnold Berleant which heavily influenced the Chinese theoreticians rethinking of Chinese traditional aesthetics and its ability to relate to the Western world as a soft-power tool. Other forms derived from this East-West contact which helped Chinese aesthetics rediscover its strong potential for postmodernity is "the living aesthetics", also present within the Chinese aestheticians' discourse such as Pan Fan, see *Aesthetics of Everyday Life*, Liu Yuedi, Cambridge Scholars, 2014.

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