

THE PARADIGM OF INHIBITED ACTION CONCERNING THE 20TH CENTURY CHINESE THEATRE*

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The aim of this study is to point out to the tendency of modern Chinese drama towards Westernization and to a certain opposition to the traditional Chinese opera on one hand, and also to realization of the paradigm of *inhibited action* on the stage or to the inability of the protagonists to act which is typical of drama as a literary genre.

Introduction

In a minor, recently published contribution¹ I tried to draw attention to the extraordinary fact that the renewal of modern Chinese lyric had taken place by a reversion to precisely that lyricist who had been inspired by the principles of classical Chinese poetry to establish a new form of Western poetry, namely Ezra Pound. A similar phenomenon can be observed not only in Eastern theatre but also in Western. Two of the best known examples are Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud, both of whom turned to East Asian and Southeast Asian theatre in seeking a solution to the crisis of Western theatre. On the other hand, an orientation to Western drama can be observed in China since the turn of the century, an orientation which stands in a certain opposition to its traditional opera.² In both cases the reversion to a foreign form of art construes itself as either the attainment of a lost or the anticipation of a future form of expression. In the following deliberations the paradigm of *inhibited action*³ – to be understood as the disappearance of action on stage on the one hand and as the inability or unwillingness of the protagonist to act on the other hand – will

* Translated from German: Wolfgang KUBIN, "Das Paradigma der Handlungshemmung. Zu einer Theorie des chinesischen Theaters im 20. Jahrhundert", in *Bochumer Jahrbuch zur Ostasienforschung* 10 (1987), pp. 143-159.

¹ Wolfgang KUBIN, "The Voyage of Death. Comments on the Imaginative Geography in Schiller's Play 'Turandot'" (Die Todesreise. Bemerkungen zur imaginativen Geographie in Schillers Stück 'Turandot'). In: *Bochumer Jahrbuch zur Ostasienforschung*, 1986, pp. 272-286.

² Cf. Bernd EBERSTEIN, *The Chinese Theatre in the 20th Century* (Das chinesische Theater im 20. Jahrhundert). Wiesbaden, Otto Harrassowitz 1983, pp. 21-32.

³ I owe this term to Wolf LEPENIES, *Melancholy and Society* (Melancholie und Gesellschaft). Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp 1949, p. 188ff.

be the main point of discussion. And, in order not to neglect Western parallels, Artaud's attitude of theatrical adaption will be discussed critically.

I The Example of Antonin Artaud

In his work *The Theatre and its Double* (French: 1938) Artaud's main concern is the separation of language and gesture observable since Aristotle and culminating in the "Gedankendrama" (drama of reflection).⁴ By turning to non-European cultures – to Mexico, Bali and the Orient in general – he calls for body instead of language, images instead of morals,⁵ in short, he calls for a theatre of gestures through the revival of the magical.⁶ The points to be questioned are not only the fascist tendencies appearing here and there in his reflections on the theatre of cruelty,⁷ but also the search for the archaic which is disguised in an attitude antagonistic to civilization. What Artaud might regard as the expression of an authentic life,⁸ for instance, China's "musical drama with its dancing movements and formal, symbolic way of representation", was regarded as barbaric by the intelligentsia of the May 4th movement.⁹ In a "country of coldness, darkness and musty odour, in short: of loathsome germs of disease"¹⁰ this theatre is an expression of a society that is a "pile of grit",¹¹ a place where life is adjusted to the role rather than the role to life.¹² The general Chinese opinion of the time, however, was that traditional drama was devoid of a sense of truth and reality.¹³ Concealed behind a theatre of gestures is the concept of an archaic unity understood as a mode of repression. Instead of reconciling everything in a happy-end, the painful reality of man has to find its reflection in the tragic.¹⁴ Ibsen became the model of the new theatre at that time, a theatre which was understood as a means of liberating the individual imprisoned in the family and clan systems and which was bereft of that magic called for by Artaud.

I hope I shall not be misunderstood here: I am not arguing against the adoption of ideas from geographically or historically distant cultures, but merely

⁴ Erich FRANZEN, *Forms of Modern Drama. From the Illusionary Stage to the Anti-theatre* (Formen des modernen Dramas. Von der Illusionsbühne zum Antitheater). 3rd unrevised ed. Munich, Beck 1974, pp. 43 and 49.

⁵ Antonin ARTAUD, *The Theatre and its Double* (Das Theater und sein Double). Frankfurt am Main, Fischer 1969. p. 72 (Oriental and Western theatre).

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 58 and 65 (on Balinese theatre).

⁷ Cf. statements *ibid.*, pp. 27ff, 29, 31ff and 33 (Theatre and the Plague), p. 44 (Staging and Metaphysics) and p. 90 (Theatre and Cruelty).

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11 (Theatre and Culture).

⁹ EBERSTEIN, p. 38.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 38 (XIONG FOXI).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 35 (FU SINIAN).

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 35 and 37 (HU SHI, CHEN DUXIU).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 37 (HU SHI).

against an uncritical and unhistorical debate which, as is the case with Artaud, leads to playing East and West off against each other and to romanticizing those cultures destined to wither under the onslaught of imperialism. In the case of China, what appears necessary is to investigate the problem of the widely described reception of Ibsen, the so-called Ibsenism in China.¹⁵ I would like to begin with Peter Szondi's views concerning the crisis of Western theatre¹⁶ and then proceed to the theory of Chinese theatre in the 20th century thereby making its inherent differences to modern Western theatre more apparent.

II Peter Szondi's Theory of Drama and Modern Chinese Literature

Szondi described three characteristics of the crisis of Western theatre at the end of the 19th century. While the classical drama of the Renaissance was characterized by an appreciation of tenderness and sensitivity in human relationships as well as dialogue and the unfolding of events in the absolute present, these criteria were replaced by inner human issues, monologue and an orientation to the past in the works of Ibsen, Chekhov, Strindberg and others;¹⁷ in short, the quick-paced sequence of present actions of the classical drama come to a halt in the self's reflection on the past. Instead of making decisions,¹⁸ the subject dwells in contemplation and is thus inhibited to undertake any kind of action. It may therefore appear paradoxical that 20th century Chinese drama with its theatre of the liberation of the individual (family, love, marriage) and of political agitation¹⁹ is bent on engendering social change and catalyzing action, stems in large measure from Ibsen. This contradiction, however, is not surprising when one regards social motives and dramaturgical representation separately. One of the essential and up to now hardly noticed characteristics of the Chinese literature of the 1920s and 1930s is the inhibited action, being particularly discernible in the works of Yu Dafu and the early Ding Ling. At the same time, the May 4th movement's call for the re-evaluation of all values – even though I understand it as an escapist fantasy²⁰ – deserves to be taken seriously, at least as a vision.

¹⁵ Elisabeth EIDE, "Ibsen's Nora and Chinese Interpretation of Female Emancipation". In: Göran MALQVIST (ed.), *Modern Chinese Literature and Its Social Context*, Stockholm 1977, pp. 140-151. By the same author, "Optimistic and Disillusioned Noras on the Chinese Literary Scene, 1919-1949". In: Anna GERSTLACHER et al. (ed.), *Woman and Literature in China*. Bochum, Brockmeyer 1985, pp. 193-222 and *China's Ibsen. From Ibsen to Ibsenism*. London, Curzon Press 1987. See also KWOK-KAN TAM, "Ibsen and Modern Chinese Dramatists: Influences and Parallels." *Modern Chinese Literature*, 2, 1986, 1, pp. 45-62 and EBERSTEIN, pp. 45-49.

¹⁶ Peter SZONDI, *Theory of Modern Drama (1880-1950)*. Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp 1963.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 14-17 and 75.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁹ Bernd EBERSTEIN, *Modern Plays from China (Moderne Stücke aus China)*. Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp 1980, p. 11.

²⁰ Cf. my contribution "Escapist Phantasies. Comments of the Spirit of the May Fourth Movement of 1919" (Aufbruchsphantasien. Bemerkungen zum Geist der 4. Mai-Bewegung von 1919). *die horen* 138, 1985, pp. 80-82.

What becomes apparent in the reception of Ibsen is not only the above mentioned aspect of liberation, but also the quality of reminiscing and actionless lingering so that both elements, action leading to departure and inhibited action, come together in the new Chinese theatre. Tian Han's one-act-play "Return to the South" of 1929²¹ represents a particularly clear example of inhibited action and eventual departure.

III Tian Han: The Return to the South

Of all the plays to be discussed here, *The Return to the South* highlights most vividly the crises pointed out by Szondi owing to its close following²² of Ibsen's *Woman of the Sea* and *Doll's House*. The four persons of the play, the mother, the young man, the daughter and the wanderer have neither anything to do with one another nor have they anything to talk about. Obligated to the present reality, both the mother and the young man are totally fixated on the daughter who in turn lives in the past memory of the wanderer. Her life consists of waiting, her world of the remaining memories of the encounter with the wanderer: the tree with the poem and the poignant verse "The memory will be the guest of the two of us" and the old pair of shoes left behind that serve as a pillow. That her aspiration is a place far away is to be understood in a twofold way: firstly, as the unreachable goal of the wanderer's roaming and, secondly, as the north where he is at home. From this distant place the wanderer returns to her every night in a dream. Instead of a secure life in the present as promised to her by the young man the daughter has consciously chosen a life of nostalgia. An intimate rapport with him as with her mother is impossible since both remain critical of her attitude. Yet the different kind of separation from reality which characterises the daughter in her allegiance to the past as well as of the wanderer in his pining for a far-off world prevents an encounter in the end. After having just returned from one year's roaming, the wanderer has to put up with the daughter's questions about the north that she formulates in the same kind of metaphoric language he had left to her before his previous departure. But, as the wanderer's story reveals, death lies over the north, the world of metaphors has lost its meaning. The daughter's urging him to stay and occupy himself domestically does not penetrate into his reality: while in the south he is craving for the north, and vice versa. This time his departure is final: nothing is left, not even the shoes or the poem. Even though the daughter rushes after him pleading, "I'll accompany him to that distant place", this act merely indicates the grip of her fantasies, for that place is unclear so that it is completely uncertain what the lovers would do there. The departure does not go beyond being a mere gesture. The opting for one's own world of fantasy remains without further impact on the drama itself, it does not open up any new field of action. In spite of this apparent absence of action-

²¹ German by Bernd EBERSTEIN. In: EBERSTEIN, *Modern Plays*, pp. 301-309. The page numbers quoted in the following refer to this translation.

²² EBERSTEIN, p. 439.

based cohesion, there is still something keeping the play knit together, namely the symbolism reflected by the metaphor of the distant place as a yearned for realm of unrequited love and by the metaphor of shoes, construable in Chinese as the vagina and in the west as the phallus.

IV Cao Yu: Peking Man

The symbolic act of departure at the end of the play is a feature common to *Return to the South* by Tian Han as well as Cao Yu's three-act play *Peking Man (Beijing Ren)*²³ written in 1940. The two plays share a kind of symbolism that encompasses and binds the acts which appear otherwise hardly connected for they almost entirely lack a sequence of action and thereby suspense.²⁴ A first symbolic motive – one might as well speak of a leitmotif – can be recognized in the title. First of all, “Peking Man” refers to the *Homo Pekinensis* discovered near Peking by Teilhard de Chardin in 1928, secondly, to the traditional official *literatus* residing in Peking and, thirdly, to the departing youth, that is, the Peking Man of tomorrow. In the Peking Man then and now two antipodal life-styles confront each other: a natural one in the sense of following immediate, physical needs, whereas the other is a refined way of living regulated by norms, and is hence Confucian. They reflect the opposites of nature and civilization, of liberty and suppression, happiness and self-torture. So it is by no means coincidental that the anthropologist, Yuan Rengan, who pursues research of the *homo pekinensis*, calls his lively daughter with her somewhat Western appearance “little monkey” whereas she, in turn, calls him “old monkey” (p. 203, 208). Both of them thereby oppose the degenerated version of the “Peking Man” whom they meet on the Zeng family estate. The head of the family, Zeng Hao, his son Zeng Wenqing and his son-in-law Jiang Tai all stand for an unproductive way of life. They as well as the whole clan live off the family heritage and would be incapable of earning their own keep. Zeng Wenqing's and Jiang Tai's pursuits in this area fail completely. Instead of possessing practical abilities they have masterfully cultivated specific life-styles. Zeng Hao's love for his casket which, in accordance with gentry customs, has been stored in the house for 15 years and is varnished every year, attains a symbolic meaning. This casket, which to Zeng Hao is a sign of his future (p. 229) and his life (p. 202), eventually falls into the hands of Zeng Hao's opponents, the Du family, whose power is not based on academic merits but rather on industrial acumen. The “wandering corpse” Zeng Wenqing, being physically weak and tired of life, is an outstanding representation of the indolent Pekinese way of living. Besides painting and playing with caged pigeons – a symbol of his loneliness, imprisonment and departure fantasies, the pastime of tea-tasting is where his true abilities flourish. Particularly notable is his extraordinary ability to discriminate between various kinds of tea:

²³ German by Bernd EBERSTEIN et al. In: EBERSTEIN, pp. 143-299.

²⁴ This conclusion was already stated by John Y.H. HU, *Ts'ao Yü*. New York, Twayne Publishers 1972, pp. 93-95.

“His tongue does not only discriminate between the various sorts of tea leaves, use, age, origin as well as the way of preparation, he can even discern whether the water came from the mountains, a river, a well, ice or faucet and whether the water was heated by charcoal, coal or twigs.” (p. 221)

And similar to his son-in-law, Jiang Tai, a gourmet with a highly refined palate, he can merely digest, but not produce (p. 222f). Apathy is the feeling towards life accompanying these kinds of abilities:

“The only thing we are capable of is sighing, dreaming, and being bitter. We take food away from useful people, we are thus like the living dead, dead living beings: our life is dying.” (p. 221).

The scene of action, the flower hall (p. 145-7), is comparable to Ibsen’s salon and shows the signs of decline particularly vividly during the third act (p. 247). The crows (p. 247, 276), chrysanthemums with hanging buds (p. 247, 261), broken mirrors (p. 249), the parting of wild geese, the caved-in wall (p. 295, also compare the image of the caved-in sky) and rats are all signs of death. Along with the father and the daughter, Yuan, only the women, desperate for a new life, attempt to leave this place where Zeng Wenqing eventually commits suicide by overdosing on opium. Since there is basically no action except for the airing of a battery of complaints, and since the dialogue neither initiates any new actions nor leads to any real clarification of standpoints, the three acts seem to be a picture-like representation of passive and apathetic living circumstances, comparable to the figures in Chekhov drama.²⁵

V Yan’an und the Verdict against Inhibited Action

Mao Zedong’s aesthetic theory, developed in 1942 in Yan’an, can also be viewed as a contribution to the discussion on the phenomenon of inhibited action observable in Chinese literature since 1919. The necessity for an active rearrangement of Chinese society returned the concept of action to literature. This holds particularly true for the theatre which had to contribute mainly to political and social change at that time.²⁶ The return of action in this case does not have the same kind of meaning for China as it had for Western theatre where it was related to the concept of human relationships (*Zwischenmenschlichkeit*) since the Renaissance. Action is thus not construed as a matter of decision, but as the necessary result of social conditions. Man himself does not act, but rather the situation compels him to do so. Because of this mechanistic view, the individual is determined by his activity. He is not the exploiter of the exploited, nor the oppressor of the oppressed, etc. As important and successful as political theatre of that time might have been for China, there is very little left which can claim aesthetic value today. The same holds true for the first

²⁵ Regarding Chekhov’s influence on Cao Yu, see Joseph S.M. LAU, *Ts’ao Yü*. Hong Kong, The Chinese University Press 1970, pp. 57-74, and HU, p. 96.

²⁶ Cf. EBERSTEIN, pp. 102-187.

three decades after 1949 of which in this context only Lao She's (1899-1966) play the *Teahouse*²⁷ (originally staged in 1958) seems to be worth further examination.

VI Lao She: The Teahouse

In an interview on the *Teahouse*, Lao She declared that the aim of his play was the burial of three historical periods,²⁸ namely, the denouement of Qing dynasty, the commencement of the Republican regime and the time following the victory against Japan.

Corresponding to the three acts of the play, these periods, three historically important points of time were chosen that are separated from each other by 20 years. The first act takes place in 1898 when China attempted to set out on the way to modernization by the 100 day reform; the second in 1918, the eve of the May 4th movement, and the third in 1948, just before the communist seizure of power. The aim as well as the structure of the play reveal an epic character. An important question in this context is what actually ties these different historical periods together theatrically. The author regards the main characters as the unifying elements,²⁹ so that the slew of people (over 70!) and the disparate events are not a mere jumbled account. In this sense one can hardly speak of a nature-like imitation of reality as a review of the play in the "Frankfurter Allgemeine" put it.³⁰ So Bernd Eberstein was quite correct in stating that the coincidental meeting of the characters with each other is convincing and that they are well connected by the flow of time.³¹ Thus one can only speak of the "appearance of continuity" to which Volker Klöpsch refers in this context.³² The director of the play, Xia Chun, also saw the focus of the play in the peculiarities of the times.³³ Since momentary events act through man, neither man as such is the hero of the play, nor the main characters in a wider sense, nor Wang Lifa, in a narrower sense. On the contrary, the one and only hero of the play is the teahouse itself as is already intimated by the title. In other words, the events surrounding the teahouse represent the hero. To put it simply: we are concerned here with a series of events which Erwin Piscator had intended and which Szondi regards as an attempt to solve the crisis of Western theatre.³⁴ Piscator, too, aims for an overcoming of the exclusive individuality of the figures through a "connection

²⁷ German translations: Volker KLÖPSCH (ed.), LAO SHE, *Das Teehaus*. Reinbeck 1980, Uwe KRÄUTER and HUO YONG (eds.), *Das Teehaus. Mit Aufführungsfotos und Materialien*, Frankfurt am Main 1980. The quotations are taken in the order. The third quotation refers to *Lao She juzuo xuan* (A Selection from Lao She's Theatrical Works). Peking 1978.

²⁸ KRÄUTER, p. 112.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

³⁰ Gerhard ROHDE, "A Teahouse as a Focus on History" (Ein Teehaus als Brennpunkt der *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Oct. 8, 1980, p. 27.

³¹ EBERSTEIN, p. 447.

³² KLÖPSCH, p. 12.

³³ KRÄUTER, p. 132.

of the action on stage and the great historically effective forces”;³⁵ in other words: the aim is “to elevate the scenic to the historical level”.³⁶ By this “the figure on stage” gains “in importance of social function where the focus is on his relationship towards society”. Wherever he appears, his class or social stratum appears with him”.³⁷ It is the question about the epic “I”, the question about the idea behind the scenes.³⁸ This idea can be found on the level of form as well as on that of content. What is experienced on a sensual level is – aside from the increasingly fierce prohibition of political talk – the change of the teahouse from act to act. In the second act, the teahouse, having once been a place of cultural encounters (*wenhua jiaoliu de suozai*, p. 28, 16, 78), has experienced a “new bloom” (*xin de fazhan*, p. 52, 35, 92) by renting out part of its space and by reduction of its services. In actual fact, the teahouse had declined. This decline is demonstrated rather well in the third act: although it had been made of rattan (a discardable in Chinese eyes) in the second act, the furniture now consists of the most primitive seating arrangement. A poster of Rita Hayworth decorates the wall³⁹ and it is no longer the tea which attracts the customers but rather the bar hostesses. Impressions like this suggest that conditions are deteriorating from generation to generation. Thus the concepts behind the images is not merely the burial of the three historical periods but also their farewell, an historical view that ties in with tradition⁴⁰ and is, moreover, shared by the persons in the play.

This is, on one hand, reflected in the expectation of decline expressed in the first two acts (“the great Qing dynasty comes to an end”, p. 41, 27, 86; 64, 46, 101; “China must go down”, p. 75, 58, 110), on the other hand, by the basic and (in the course of the last two acts) repeatedly voiced doubt in any kind of reform (*gailiang*: p. 52, 36, 93; 111, 92, 136; 114, 95, 138; 120, 101 and 142) and in revolution (*geming* p. 74, 52, 109 as self-deception). Rather than improving business, the reform, i.e. the adoption of the teahouse to the changing needs of the time, ends up contributing to its decline. A similar fate befalls the efforts of the capitalist Qing Zhongyi as those of the teahouse’s host. His contribution to the salvation of China through the strengthening of its national industry (p. 41f, 27f, 86, 74f, 57, 109) ends up with his factory being torn down (p. 112, 93,

³⁴ SZONDI, pp. 109-115. During the Seventh Meeting of the International Brecht Society, December 1986 in Hong Kong, Huang Zuolin stated that in 1951 he had given an introduction on Brecht and Piscator’s during a six-hour talk in Shanghai, yet without any success. Although, according to Huang, Lao She was in Peking at that time, I still consider it a possibility that the author was familiar with Piscator’s *oeuvre* either through newspaper articles or reports from friends.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 112ff.

³⁷ PISCATOR, quoted in SZONDI, p. 111.

³⁸ SZONDI, pp. 114ff., FRANZEN, p. 80.

³⁹ KRÄUTER, p. 138.

⁴⁰ Cf. my work *The Lyrical Oeuvre of Du Mu (803-852). An Attempt at Interpretation* (Das Lyrische Werk des Tu Mu, 803-852). Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz 1976, pp. 39-49.

136). During this historic period dominated by Guomindang and American military forces when the Peking opera and the Chinese art of cooking are condemned to decline, the only economically possible undertaking is a “trust” of dancing girls, prostitutes, jeep-girls and waitresses (p. 91f, 70f, 120). By scattering paper money in the last scene the emphasis is put on decline even though the narrator, a street musician who appears before and in between the acts to entertain the audience and prepare them for upcoming events, mentions in his last song that the communist Eighth Route Army and thereby the imminent communist takeover. The play itself adheres strictly to the idea that everything Chinese is doomed to decline.

VII Gao Xingjian: The Bus Station

At the outset of my deliberations I attempted to discuss briefly the reception of Ibsen’s theatre in a society which is bent on change. In the light of Gao Xingjian’s rejection of just this theatre, it becomes clear that its reception in China was not consciously linked with the phenomenon of the inhibited action even though this played an essential role in its original conception, but with the structure of the spoken theatre. In his deliberations about the nature of theatre (*Tan xijuxing*),⁴¹ Gao Xingjian characterizes Ibsen’s and Strindberg’s dramatic art as a theatre in which a problem lies at the centre of the play. This kind of problem-centred-theatre (*wentiju*) would basically take place in one room (a salon) whereby the situation as well as the plot are pre-determined in a specific way. The most crucial medium is language, which makes all persons on stage – independent of their particular role – philosophers, “giants of language” (*yuyan juren*). Su Shuyang’s *Neighbours* (*zuo lin you she* of 1979/80) as well as Li Longyun’s *The Xiaojing Lane* (*Xiaojing Lutong* of 1980/83) are regarded by Gao Xingjian to be in line with this tradition.⁴² As can be seen from his review *My Relation to Brecht*,⁴³ Gao drew away from Ibsen and his theatre based on language when he discovered Brecht’s epic theatre, a theatre that does not attempt to imitate a nature-like reproduction of life on stage and does not connect conflicts to a *leitmotif*. Although the method of “distancing”, so typical of Brecht, is apparent in the difference between actor and role as well as in the idea of the narrative and commentating actor who can step out of his role (highly evident in the *Bus Station*⁴⁴), one should not overlook the fact that the influence of various playwrights come together in Gao Xingjian’s theatrical work

⁴¹ GAO XINGJIAN, “Tan xiju xing”. *Suibi*, 3, 1983, p. 118.

⁴² ROSWITHA BRINKMANN (trans.), SU SHUYANG, *Nachbarn (1979/80). Zuo lin you she*. Bochum, Brockmeyer 1984. Regarding the original and the discussion on Li Longyun’s play, see *You zhengyi de huaju juban xuanji*. Peking, Zhongguo xiju 1986. Vol. 2, pp. 107-279.

⁴³ GAO XINGJIAN, “My Relationship with Brecht” (Mein Verhältnis zu Brecht). *Zeitschrift für Kulturaustausch*, 3, 1986, pp. 319-320.

⁴⁴ GAO XINGJIAN, *Bus Stop. A Life-like Comedy in One Act*. CHANG HSIEN-CHEN and Wolfgang KUBIN (eds.), with an Epilogue by Wolfgang KUBIN. Bonn, Yazhima 1987.

such as Ionesco, Beckett, Artaud (theatre as movement⁴⁵) and Grotovski (the abolition of the distance of spectator and actor⁴⁶). One should furthermore not overlook the fact that the inhibited action plays an important role in the *Bus Station*. Although in his stage directions Gao explicitly speaks up against Ibsen, his attempt to realize a multi-voiced theatre in the style of a sonata or a rondo with the variations in atmosphere illuminates a special problem. The theme of waiting ten years at a bus station for a bus which never comes suits Gao's concept of a unity of drama and poetry. In this way the play almost escapes the problems with which an actionless theatre is confronted: For, as Szondi exemplifies with Hoffmannsthal's lyric dramas, the central category of the "atmosphere" creates the unity of subject and object and the unity of time.⁴⁷ In his stage direction Gao Xingjian speaks not only of the principles of stasis but also of the principles of dynamism reflected in the title (*chezhan*: che/vehicle/ dynamic, and *zhan*/station/stasis). During a lecture at Bonn University on November 12, 1985 Gao explained the momentum of action (*dongzuo*) as a decisive trait of the bus station, a movement which results from a transition from waiting to departure, which means a psychic process of transition.⁴⁸ This concept of movement brings to mind the decision for departure from the existing conditions that crop up at the end of the *Return to the South and Peking Man*. The inhibited action here is expressed by the passivity of waiting, which on the formal level as well as on that of content constitutes the essence of the *Bus Station* (although never mentioned directly, the ten years of waiting evoke the association with the Cultural Revolution, 1966-1976). The waiting itself leads to the eventual departure for the city after 10 years, but this kind of action is nothing more than an empty gesture and remains more or less irrelevant for the plot (also compare Chekhov's *The Three Sisters* and their longing for Moscow). In the subtitle of the *Bus Station* there is talk of a "life-like lyrical comedy". The comic moment in the stage instructions is defined as speaking for the sake of speaking and waiting for the sake of waiting. Thus, neither the waiting nor the speaking of the persons on stage is to be considered meaningful. The dialogue, consisting of various stereotypical patterns, is impersonal in style and atmosphere. The focus of the conversation is – very much like in *Beckett's Waiting for Godot* – merely an attempt to rescue a theatre that is handicapped by inhibited action and is thus caught in a crisis.⁴⁹ But dialogue is by no means a solution for a theatre floundering in the inhibited action. The dialogue as well as the characters are type-cast, but, unlike "Godot" they are nameless, being more or less archetyped as "mother", "girl", "craftsman", abstract type without personal identity⁵⁰ that come close to Ionesco's the-

⁴⁵ GAO XINGJIAN, "Tan shijian yu kongjian" (On Space and Time). *Suibi* 5, 1983, p. 108.

⁴⁶ GAO XINGJIAN, "Tan juchang xing" (On the Character of the Stage). *Suibi* 2, 1983, p. 92.

⁴⁷ SZONDI, p. 81.

⁴⁸ *Wenyibao*, 3, 1984, p. 29.

⁴⁹ SZONDI, pp. 88-90.

⁵⁰ FRANZEN, p. 128.

ses about theatre as comprising “interchangeable figures of mankind”.⁵¹ In this regard, one may not fully believe the author because the characters on stage are not only talking at cross purposes and are not only occupied with problems which are absurd in view of their waiting, but they do understand each other, especially well in their search for shelter from the rain and in the final departure. In the view of his relation to Brecht, Gao Xingjian contends that reason is supposed to be evoked from the audience in epic theatre. In the case presented, the reasoning of the audience is appealed to in a twofold way: firstly, by the figure of the silent man, who was already searching for a bus station when the bus went by the first time without stopping. He and his melody, which pervades the whole play somewhat like a *leitmotif*, represent the “call of the age” (*shidai de zhaohuan*).⁵² On the other hand, the futile quality of the crowd’s action is demonstrated by their waiting at the bus station for ten years instead of just following the example set by the silent man. The spectator in the audience who does not immediately gain insight into the action of the silent masses will do so at the latest when the masses finally rise up. It is not the conversation which initiates a cognitive process in the audience but rather the sensual impression conveyed by the melody and the eleven approaches of the bus that never stops.

VIII Conclusion

If one was to forward a theory of 20th century Chinese theatre based on the four plays discussed here, it could be said that, apart from the reception of Western theatre at the turn of the century that was employed solely for strengthening the motherland, the hope for social change to be impacted by dramatical means could not evade the problem discussed by Peter Szondi, namely, that the inhibited action in a China striving for revolution has social causes which lie in the weakness of the individual before and after 1949. It is interesting to note that the one play which, in contrast to the plays by Tian Han, Cao Yu and Gao Xingjian, abandons the departure fantasy, that is Lao She’s *Teahouse*, is the only play which solved the problem of the plotless drama resulting from the crisis discussed above. But this was achieved only at the expense of the illusion of social engagement.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 132.

⁵² Cf. *Xijubao*, 3, 1984., p. 4.