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**The Birth of Chinese Tragedy:  
the Tragic Clash of Gender Roles  
in Cao Yu's *Thunderstorm***

Doctoral Dissertation

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## I. Theme and objective of research

The main scope of research of the present dissertation is the 20th-century development of modern Chinese drama, the *huaju* 话剧 and one of its representative dramatic pieces. In this historic period, China was subject to revolutionary changes (mostly enforced in the beginning), resulting in the substantial transformation of its society and culture. The wild enthusiasm that affected and saw these changes through created a nation-wide positive initiative, and thus promoted a substantive discourse on a series of important social and cultural issues.

Changes by definition carry contradiction. Next to progress, there is always the difficulty of breaking away from the old and familiar, and the controversial state of mind that inevitably accompanies this process. The diverse manifestations of this duality that surface in the literary works of the era enrich them with a special complexity.

An outstanding achievement of this period is the 'promotion' of theatre. The art of traditional Chinese theatre is a unique, complex and invaluable cultural heritage, which, in spite of the temporary dominance of this 20th-century new form, thrives on. The modern dramatic art and play is a special direction of development in the history of Chinese drama that was the result of the impact Western dramatic traditions made on Chinese ones. This reform of theatre and drama was purely the demand of the time. To achieve and consolidate the social and cultural changes a powerful force was needed, one that could transform minds and souls. The fact that theatre in this period does undertake this important social quest is just one more fascinating facet of contemporary Chinese culture.

Precisely because the literary heritage of this period is so incredibly immense, it was very important for me to properly narrow my topic down. One single literary piece can well serve as the theme of a dissertation, since it can be subject to a both thorough and versatile examination. My aim was to choose a dramatic piece that embodies as many characteristics of its age as possible, and also one that can faithfully reflect the spirit of the age I regard admirable. One further consideration was that it had to offer contradictions ample for multiple interpretations. Cao Yu's 曹禺 *Thunderstorm* (*Leiyu* 雷雨) exhausts all above mentioned criteria and, thus, seemed to be the ideal choice.

Cao Yu is an outstanding playwright of modern Chinese literature and is amongst the few in his country who are internationally recognized. His personal and professional life were full of hardships and challenges, but the vast amount of personal experience he gathered largely contributed to his ability to depict social connections and conflicts between and *within*

individuals in a credible manner. Due to his extraordinary literacy and openness, he got acquainted with most of Western dramatic traditions and a lot of works of dramatic art. At the same time, he bore a deep respect for the dramatic and theatrical traditions of his own nation too. The simultaneous experience of patriotic loyalty and cosmopolitan 'vagabondage' inspired the creation of his plays, which mark the maturity of modern Chinese drama.

Cao Yu adopted a new approach towards writing plays, and – unlike many of his contemporaries – did not merely 'imported' Western dramatic form and content, but planted them in Chinese soil and used them wisely afterwards. He did adopt Western dramatic form but only to fill it with the dramatic content of contemporary Chinese life. This is what makes his works traditional and progressive at the same time: a synthesis rarely attained and a balance seldom found in his time.

Amongst the many Western playwrights he knew and admired, Ibsen was Cao Yu's number one role model. The 'Nora-phenomenon' and Ibsenism both played a decisive role in the development of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Chinese drama, and are elaborated on in my thesis. Nora, as the symbol of the 'New Woman', inspired hundreds of Chinese literary men and women to create the likes of her in their works. The appearance of the *heroine* on the Chinese stage is one of the most revolutionary achievements this period can boast with, and this is something that is fully realized in the dramatic art of Cao Yu.

Feminism was an important issue to discuss in 19<sup>th</sup>-century European context, and it became just as acute a problem in early-20<sup>th</sup>-century China. It is hardly surprising then, that this imminent issue was emphatically represented in contemporary literary media. Feminist ideology is also essential to understanding *Thunderstorm*, therefore, in my dissertation I also deal with the development of feminist thought in China.

Reassigning gender roles within family and society soon became one of the most pressing social issues of the age. One could say, the redefinition of women's social status considerably upset traditional social hierarchy. The change was long overdue and inevitable, but it did not serve the interests of all, and consequently, provoked serious social debates. The irresponsible promotion of women's liberation caused mortal problems, and time proved that sobriety and realistic vision were indispensable in this matter too, if one wanted to carry out extensive social reforms.

*Thunderstorm* became a successful and influential play already in its own time, and has been the most popular and the most widely commented Chinese play ever since in the past 85 years. Nevertheless, drama as a literary genre has never been a dominant one in the history of Chinese literature. Accordingly, Chinese literature abroad (including in Hungary) is much more

represented by prose and poetry than by drama. Translations and commentary of plays are not widely available. The main objective of my research is to a certain extent level this disproportion. In Hungary, at the end of the 1950's and in the beginning of the 1960's Cao Yu's two plays were published in Hungarian, but they still remain in obscurity. It was my intention to re-introduce modern Chinese drama and also Cao Yu to the interested Hungarian audience. The 60-year-anniversary of the 1959 edition of *Thunderstorm* (translated by Pál Miklós) seems to be an ideal timing for the publication of a work on this very topic.

## II. Methodology of research

The structure of my dissertation to a certain extent mirrors the methodology of my research. It is made up of fifteen chapters which divide into two major parts. The first seven chapters describe the historic, social and cultural peculiarities of the age, providing a complex background for the second part which deals exclusively with *Thunderstorm*. The historical and social milieu (Chapter II) is essential for understanding a work of art that was born at that time. On the other hand, as I already mentioned, introducing the circumstances of the development of 20th-century drama was not only a means, but also an important task I wanted to accomplish.

Considering that I will be writing about a dramatic piece, it is inevitable that the traditions of classical Chinese theatre – that are exposed to the changes of the early 20th century – be shortly outlined (Chapter III). A further truly relevant issue is the social-cultural mission that theatre takes on itself in this period of time. I discuss in details the reasons due to which Western-style drama (that had no precedent whatsoever in China) could now take root and get accepted, and I touch upon the contradictions, drawbacks and achievements of this peculiar process as well (Chapter IV).

Within 20th-century drama and also within Cao Yu's *Thunderstorm* my main area of interest has been the conflict and transformation of traditional gender roles in contemporary Chinese society. Such research presupposes that one is aware of the main milestones and characteristic features of the feminist movements spreading in China in the first decades of the 20th century. This is the topic of Chapter V.

Chapter VI deals with the 'Nora-phenomenon' and Ibsenism as major driving forces influencing the cultural and literary life of an empire that had entirely different literary traditions of its own. Comparing the *Thunderstorm* with Ibsen's *Nora* is an analysing method I

consciously adopted and carried out from the beginning to the end of my research. I firmly believe that the way Cao Yu interpreted Ibsen's epoch-making play and applied the lessons learned to Chinese stage is more than mere imitation which was fashionable, even expected in his age: it is indeed a *constructive adaptation*.

What follows is the biography of Cao Yu (Chapter VII), with special attention to his relationship (not only romantic) with women. This theme seems to bear peculiar significance if we want to understand a man who created such extraordinary and immortal heroines.

It is from Chapter VIII that I start writing specifically about *Thunderstorm*. First, I introduce the circumstances under which it came to the world. I deal with its reception and the critical opinion (both positive and negative) it triggered, then I follow by relating the story of the play (Chapter IX).

The next chapter enlists and expands the various interpretations of *Thunderstorm*. During the past almost a century, Cao Yu's drama was defined in many different ways, but, as I gather, three main tendencies can well be identified: first, the social–realist, secondly, the determinist, and finally, the psychological interpretation. These are introduced in vice-chapters respectively, supported or confuted with Cao Yu's own words.

Chapter XI deals with the main characters of my dissertation, the heroines of *Thunderstorm*. Although my primary concern was the figure of Zhou Fanyi 周繁漪, it is precisely for her better understanding that I write about the other two heroines of the play. The appeal of *Thunderstorm* is, amongst other reasons, lies in the fact that Cao Yu created a series of heroines all different in temperament, whose fates become inseparably intertwined onstage right in front of our eyes. Their interests clash, and they all manage their conflicts in a different manner. I believe that analysing *Thunderstorm* from different perspectives yields a deeper understanding of the play.

Chapter XII serves contrast. Cao Yu himself writes in the famous *Foreword* of his play (*Leiyu xu* 《雷雨》序) that it was most deliberate on his part to create his heroines strong and his 'heroes' weak. The weakness of men underlines the strength of women, and, on the other hand, thus Cao Yu allows us a glimpse into his own conception of the transforming gender roles in a revolting society.

In Chapter XIII I set out to examine Nora Helmer and Zhou Fanyi as *mothers*, it being an inherent quality of women. What follows is the comparison of the revolt of the two heroines, touching on the issues of dependence–independence, self-submission and self-assertion. I try to point out the difficulties Chinese women had to encounter in their struggle for individual

freedom, and also the barriers that confined this struggle. Finally, I conclude my point and attempt to decode the message of *Thunderstorm*. Chapter XV is a short summary of the main points of my thesis.

The vast majority of the source materials I consulted for completing the present dissertation are in Chinese. This, however, was not a predetermined or conscious decision on my part. During the course of my research my first impression was confirmed, namely that the commentary on Cao Yu's *Thunderstorm* in Chinese language is enormously extensive, whereas Western-language works are not at all abundant. I started to feel drawn to explore how Chinese way of thinking judges this play that represents such a milestone in the development of its own dramatic literature. In other words, the fact that I relied largely on Chinese sources was something I resolved on underway. It originated from external circumstances, but I decided to adopt it as my research method.

### **III. The results of the dissertation**

1.

In my thesis I attempted to outline the 20th-century development of Chinese drama, as well as the forces that influenced this development. The rise of modern drama depended on the balance of three significant factors: the Western influence it received, the socio-cultural mission it had to undertake and the national traditions it had to preserve. In my dissertation I trace the fluctuation of this balance, introducing the decisive figures and phenomena, relating the failures and successes of *huaju* in the first decades of the 20th century. There is no available scientific writing on this subject in Hungarian, thus, the present work can serve as a starting point for those interested.

2.

China that has been for thousands of years both physically and mentally locked up, was now forced to open up and accommodate Western influence. Among all ideologies that find their way to China in this period, one with the greatest influence on its culture and literature was

undoubtedly Ibsenism and the 'Nora-phenomenon'. It was my aim to introduce and analyse in full detail all possible facets of this deep-rooting and long-lasting impact.

3.

Feminism is an important issue that divides 20<sup>th</sup>-century societies, among them China to a large extent. It has to be born in mind, though, that 'Chinese feminism' has a peculiar socio-cultural background, entirely different from its Western counterpart. The heroines of Ibsen and Cao Yu are often interpreted as pioneers of feminism. Both playwrights expressed a clear-cut opinion in this respect, and refuted all unilateral interpretations of their plays and characters. Their *ars poeticae* seem to coincide: despite the fact that their dramas do indeed reflect contemporary social circumstances, what they have always regarded primary is the depiction of *man*, the eternal and complex nature of *human soul*. The main object of creation is man, society is only a background. Although Nora and Fanyi cannot be but representatives of their sex, more importantly, they are *unique individuals*., regardless of sex. During the millennia of Chinese empire, it was the main characteristic of its reigning Confucian ideology that individuals are small building blocks of social hierarchy. The significance of *personal* life lied not in itself but in its contribution to *community*. It is precisely the effect of Western thought that the concept of *individuum* as such comes to existence in China. To start striving for women's liberation, women (and man as well) first had to be liberated from under the oppression of social hierarchy.

In the swirling of new ideas so subversive to Chinese traditions, it is next to impossible to identify a neat order. It might not be too bold to say that in China in the beginning of the 20th century humanism and feminism gained ground hand in hand, shoulder to shoulder; *the human individual* and *the Woman* awakened at the same time. My assumption is that in China in the beginning of the 20th-century the redefinition of gender roles had an inseparable relationship with the individual abandoning collective consciousness.

4.

Women in 20th-century China set out for space and right for dignified human life. Literature is a means that most clearly reflects the main currents of thought of its age, thus, it seems just right that woman appears, and, what is more, becomes hero onstage as well. Many playwrights of the age created heroines, but it is unique how Cao Yu created a whole pantheon of them. It was one of the most important objectives of my research to unfold and describe the

controversial state of mind, the inner struggles of women of the age, through the complex analysis of Cao Yu's heroines.

As one of the most important social changes in contemporary Chinese society, the mutual relationship between gender roles is undergoing a fundamental transformation. An interesting period of transition begins: clashing and refining, demanding and accepting, to and forth. I think it is conceivable that the conflict of interests, the establishment of an equilibrium is not possible without collateral damages. It is just credible if the depiction of this pursuit for balance takes on a tragic representation.

Tragedy as such has no tradition in China, but Cao Yu was deeply affected by the spirituality of Western tragedy. He had his reason to give his drama a tragic ending. In a society that has been ruled in collectivist perspective by man and never women for many thousands of years, the re-evaluation of the position of the individual and that of women was not easy or smooth. Confrontation had to be bold and persistent, it took the efforts of many pioneer men and women to bring the social roles of man and women closer to each other. Prejudice resided not only in men but also in women themselves, and, what is more, is present up to this very day in modern Chinese way of thinking.

The relationship between man and woman is the eternal theme and inspiration of literature. All genres of contemporary literature immortalized this insecurity, this constant search for self-consciousness on part of both man and woman. The dramatic nature of theatre is a perfect medium to document this dramatic process. This clash between gender roles is emphatically represented in contemporary drama, which, according to my assumption, led to the birth of modern Chinese tragedy.

5.

The reason I chose Cao Yu's *Thunderstorm* as the topic of my doctoral research is because it manifests all characteristic features of the age I wanted to write about. This age 'challenged, undermined and swept away' the old monarchical form of government, traditional Confucianist culture and morality, the old patriotic family system. A new China was about to be born, that yet had to fight and overcome economic difficulties, social injustice and political intrigues. Cao Yu's dramas clearly reflect these struggles, and thus, contribute a lot to the understanding of this complex transitional period.

Although Cao Yu was heavily influenced by Western drama and, above all, Ibsen, his plays remained essentially Chinese all throughout his dramatic writing career. The theoretic

knowledge and practical experience he learned were all made use of to depict contemporary Chinese society,

As I mentioned, Cao Yu was deliberate in writing a tragedy. An ending similar to *Nora's* would not have been credible. *Thunderstorm* – unlike many other literary works of his age – does not represent *solution*, but *the course of searching*, and this is exactly what makes it a faithful narrative of its changing times. Fanyi's fate is linked to China, her *not leaving* is Cao Yu's realism. He is well aware of the transformation of gender roles in society in front of his very eyes, but he has no illusions and knows that change will take time and require sacrifices.

6.

It was a secondary objective of my research to survey the critical commentary analysing *Thunderstorm*, to establish its main viewpoints and tendencies, to explore the opinions on the play itself and on its characters, at that time and today. It is my definite observation that the ideological approach of all analyses is highly determined by the marxist line of thought that allows little space for divergence. It was most instructive for me to experience this style and terminology for they bear significant differences with Western standards. I cannot declare to be competent in the rules and expectations of Chinese critical commentary, therefore I only hazard to state obvious dissimilarities. It seems to me that the task of a Chinese critic is more summarizing than creative. Articles tend to outline and conclude the knowledge accumulated on this subject up to that point, mostly adopting a certain guideline. Formulating original ideas does not seem to be an expectation. Chinese essays are also freer and less objective in style than what we are accustomed to in Western commentaries. I point out these differences and comment on them all throughout my paper wherever relevant.

#### **IV. Possibilities of further research based on the results of the dissertation**

The present dissertation fills a gap in the sense that it introduces an author and a play both most influential in China, yet hardly known abroad. It may well serve as a starting point for future researches in the field of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Chinese drama.

Only two of Cao Yu's excellent dramas have ever been translated to Hungarian: *Thunderstorm* and *Beijing man* (*Beijing ren* 北京人, 1940), the latter was published in 1961, in the translation of Vilma Mészáros. It would be highly favourable to embark on the translation of Cao Yu's other famous play, *Sunrise* (*Richu* 日出, 1936). Moreover, I think that considering the length of time that has passed, it may also be possible to re-translate *Thunderstorm* itself. For the translation of any Cao Yu play, it is absolutely essential to be familiar with his first and most influential drama. It might not be an overstatement to say that the present work more or less exhausted the analysis of *Thunderstorm*, and in this respect can serve as a source to inspire further research on the topic.