Pursuing New Chinese Theatricality

Scenography of Modern Chinese Drama in Post-reform China

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Abstract: By scrutinizing three distinctive scenographies of one famous modern Chinese drama *Thunderstorm*, the paper reveals how scenography cooperates with vernacular Chinese aesthetics and global consumer culture to create new theatricality in post-reform China.   Moreover, for the first time, the paper designed a new methodology called scenography semiotics for the sake of systemic and comprehensive scenography studies.   It is adapted from theatre semiotics and covers all the scenography elements during theatre communications.   By applying the method, the paper shows that in 1990s the scenography of *Thunderstorm* pursues a new Chinese theatrical technique, which derives from traditional Chinese opera to some extent.   And in 2000s the scenography of *Thunderstorm* pursues a "magnificent realism", which is an alliance between global consumer culture and realism.   The paper also discloses that the shifting scenographies of *Thunderstorm* were productions of political, economic and cultural factors in post-reform China.

Keywords: Scenography, scenography semiotics, modern Chinese drama, culture

1. Introduction

Many scholars are inclined to regard scenography of modern Chinese drama from 1950s to present as a result of artistic autonomy; however, three distinctive scenographies of one drama *Thunderstorm*, which were directed in 1950s, 1990s and 2000s respectively, suggest that the scholars oversimplify the Chinese scenography.   From the analysis of these three scenographies, the paper argues that the scenographies cooperate with vernacular Chinese aesthetics and global consumer culture to create new theatricality in post-reform China.   And this cooperation is, in fact, a compromise among political, economic and cultural factors in post-reform China.

1.1 Terms

Three terms, "theatricality", "scenography" and "modern Chinese drama", should be clarified before the coming discussion.   Theatricality is a complicated term related to theatre or the presentation of plays. [14]   It is "the inauthentic", "an effect produced through mastery of skill", and "the mode of excess" in theatre. [4]   With theatricality there is no pretense of naturalism or realism. [3]   The second term, scenography, also known as stage design, is the "designing, executing, and lighting of a stage setting". [15]   It is concerned with the total visual effect of a dramatic production.   It includes the designing of scenic background, setting, lighting, costumes, etc.   The third term, modern Chinese drama, is also known as spoken drama or *Huaju*.   It was invented by Chinese students abroad at the beginning of 20th century and became one of the most primary types of dramas in China since then.   It imitated Western dramatic conventions and contrasted with traditional Chinese opera, which was then viewed as too constraining for expressing the concerns of an increasingly modern

world. [2]   Consisting mostly of speaking and acting, it emerged as an alternative to traditional Chinese opera, which combined singing, speaking, acting, and acrobatics. [2]

1.2 Case Selection

One famous modern Chinese drama *Thunderstorm* is adopted as the case for analysis.   It was written by playwright Cao Yu in 1933 and was published in 1934.   It narrates the miserable fates of the members and servants of a wealthy Chinese family in 1920s.   Although the dramatic script of *Thunderstorm* remains the same, the scenographies differ greatly in different periods.   Three distinctive performances which were directed by different directors at different periods draw the attention: the first one was directed by Xia Chun, from Beijing People's Art Theatre, in 1954 (Fig.1); the second one was directed by Wang Xiaoying, from China Youth Art Theatre, in 1993 (Fig.2); the third one was an all-star version directed by Chen Xinyi in 2004 (Fig.3). *Thunderstorm* is very important for the studies on scenography of modern Chinese drama.   It is one of the most classic modern Chinese dramas in China.   It has been staged more than five hundred times both in China and some foreign countries by different troupes. [12]   Moreover, it has never been a "static" drama but a "dynamic" one at almost every period.   Since its debut in 1930s, Chinese artists have readapted it again and again to cry out their own voices.   Such a long-lasting and living drama has great potential to reveal some subtle shifts of Chinese scenography.

1.3 Methodology (Scenography semiotics)

The paper designed a new methodology called scenography semiotics for the sake of systemic and comprehensive scenography studies.   It is adapted from theatre semiotics and covers all the elements related to scenography during theatre communications.

Fig.1 *Thunderstorm (1954)*   Fig.2 *Thunderstorm (1993)*

Fig.3 *Thunderstorm (2004)*

Semiotics is the study of signs: words, images, behavior, human and animal arrangements of many kinds, in which a meaning is relayed by a corresponding outward manifestation. [9]   Saussure defines the sign as having two parts: the signifier, which is the material phenomenon we are able to perceive, and the signified, which is the concept evoked by the signifier. [17]   Later, Peirce develops Saussure's theory with the idea that a signified can be a concept, a thing or even another signifier. [16]

Theatre semiotics is the application of semiotics to the theatre as a sign system.   It is regarded as the most productive theory in theatre study up to now. [1,6,8,18]   It is founded by Prague School, who established the principle that everything within the theatrical frame is a sign. [11]   During 1960s to 1980s, some scholars categorized the signs in theatre.   For example, Esslin classifies the sign systems in theatre into five groups, such as framing systems, sign systems at the actor's disposal, visual sign systems, the text systems, and aural sign systems. [8]   In 1970s and 80s, some other scholars regarded theatre as a performance rather than a "pure literature". [11]   They paid attention to all the factors within theatre communication, which includes playwriter (the sender who produces the dramatic text), director and designers (both the receiver and sender who transcodes the dramatic text to physical stage and performances), audience (the receiver who watches the performance and the sender who responds to performance) and all the communications among them.   However, theatre semiotics is not specifically designed for scenography studies.

Scenography semiotics, which is a revision of theatre semiotics, is designed for the systemic and comprehensive scenography studies (Fig.4). It covers the whole process of theatre communication, from scenography production to feedback. It consists of three parts, which are categorized by different stages of theatre communication.   The first category is about the context of scenography, which could be thought as a precondition before the performance.   It includes two aspects: "social context", which is the political, economic and cultural condition of a society, and "director and scenographer's conception", which is director and scenographer's understanding of theatre and scenography.   The second category is about the scenography during performance.   It borrows the classification in theatre semiotics, which regards theatre as a complex sign system and divides it into some sub-systems.   The sub-systems relevant to scenography are chosen.   They are theatre type, scenic background, properties, costume and lighting.   Because of the attributes of signs, the relationship between the signifier and signified is emphasized.   The third category is about the response to the scenography after performance.   It consists of "audience's responses", which are the comments from audience and the box office, and "critics' comments", which are criticisms.
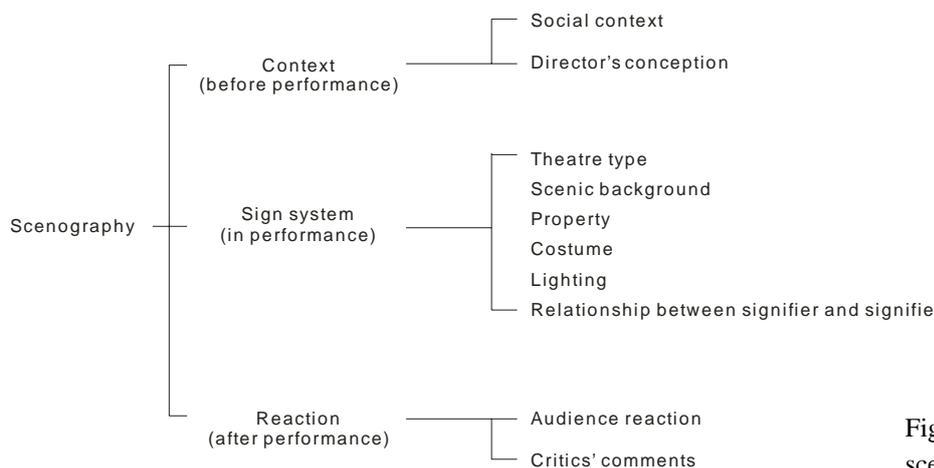

Fig.4 Analytical frame of scenography semiotics

2. Case studies

2.1 Scenography of *Thunderstorm* in pre-reform China

Before Chinese economic reform, scenography of *Thunderstorm (1954)*, which was designed by Beijing People's Art Theatre in 1954, was one representative in the period. Two scenes: one is in the Chous' living room, and the other one is in the Lus' little inner room, were staged according to the script of Thunderstorm (Fig.5&6). The scenographies obeyed realism, which is a "general principle that the stage should portray, in a reasonable facsimile, ordinary people in ordinary circumstances..." In this play, almost every stage setting was a simulation of the archetype in the real world. The table on stage, for example, was a simulation of an authentic carved round table in Qing dynasty (1644-1911). More persuasively, the design process revealed that creating realistic "simulations" on stage was the aim. The scenographer explicated the method how they accomplished the design: first, they analyzed the fictive characters' backgrounds and interests; second, they found and visited the matched people in the real world, and learnt from their furniture and layouts in house; finally, they asked craftsmen to make all settings according to these existing archetypes. Moreover, relationships between the settings (the signifier) and what they represented (the signified) were realistic during the performance. In a word, the scenography of *Thunderstorm (1954)* tried to eliminate theatricality on the stage.

2.2 Scenography of *Thunderstorm* in post-reform China

2.2.1 *Thunderstorm (1993)*

However, the Chinese economic reform brought great changes to the scenographies of modern Chinese drama. The opening policy brought various thinking all over the world into China, including many modern theatre theories, such as *Towards a Poor Theatre* by Jerzy Grotowski, *The Empty Space* by Peter Brook, etc. At the same time, China began to shift from "planning economy" to "socialist market economy". The theatres, which were once completely subsidized by the government before 1980, become increasingly self-sufficient in 1990s. [7] Gradual economic independence of theatre lessened political control on dramas. Modern Chinese drama artists have got more artistic freedom since then. [5]

In 1993, Thunderstorm was re-directed by Director Wang Xiaoying. Comparing to the former realistic one, scenography of this version obviously achieved theatricality. The most noticeable difference was that the scenic background was not simulations of real life. Two different rooms in the second and third acts were represented by the same black scenic background without any reflections (Fig.7 &8). We call this a "neutral" scenic background. It is a kind of background suitable for all the different scenes in one play. It didn't depict

Fig.5 The Chous' room, *Thunderstorm (1954)*

Fig.6 The Lus' room, *Thunderstorm (1954)*

any environments of two different scenes in details; instead, it tried to activate audience' imagination by actors' performance.   This theatrical technique has been widely used in traditional Chinese opera or *xiqu*, which is one of the most important agents of vernacular Chinese aesthetics and originated in China as early as 12th century. [20]   *Shoujiu*, the scenic background in traditional Chinese opera, doesn't depict environment precisely either. In these performances, the audience "imagined" rather than "saw" the background of the drama.

The props in *Thunderstorm (1993)* was minimized, and it changed only a bit when the fictive locale changed from Chou's grand living room to Lu's shabby inner room (Fig.9 &10).   Although Wang juxtaposed all the props of the whole performance on stage simultaneously, the sum of pieces in *Thunderstorm (1993)* was much less than that in *Thunderstorm (1954)*.   In the illuminated area, only about six pieces of stage furniture, were clearly visible.   The minimized properties and their layout in the play show a relation with theatrical techniques of traditional Chinese opera as well.   The scenography of traditional Chinese opera always minimizes properties in performance.   As few as one table, two chairs and one *shoujiu* are enough for a formal performance.   The paradigms which define the arrangement of tables and chairs have been developed in traditional Chinese opera from long ago.   Apparently, the layouts of *Thunderstorm (1993)* borrowed two paradigms which were known as *Dazuo kuayi* and *bazi kuayi* (Fig.11&12).   The arrangement of a low desk, two chairs and a "sofa" in Chous' living room resembled that of *dazuo kuayi*.   The trifle difference is that Wang replaced the chair in traditional Chinese opera paradigm with a "sofa", which was in nature a "chair" as well. And He also changed the table into a low table.   However, the main structure and components of *dazuo kuayi* still kept well in Wang's layout.   Similarly, the layout in Lus' inner resembled that of *bazi kuayi*.

Fig.7 The Chous' room, *Thunderstorm (1993)*
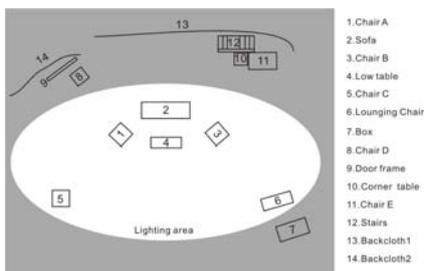

Fig.8 The Lus' room, *Thunderstorm (1993)*

1.Chair A
2.Sofa
3.Chair B
4.Low table
5.Chair C
6.Lounging Chair
7.Box
8.Chair D
9.Door frame
10.Corner table
11.Chair E
12.Stairs
13.Backcloth1
14.Backcloth2

Fig.9 Layout of the Chous' room, *Thunderstorm (1993)*

1.Chair A
2.Sofa
3.Chair B
4.Low table
5.Chair C
6.Lounging Chair
7.Box
8.Chair D
9.Door frame
10.Corner table
11.Chair E
12.Stairs
13.Backcloth1
14.Backcloth2
15.Backcloth3
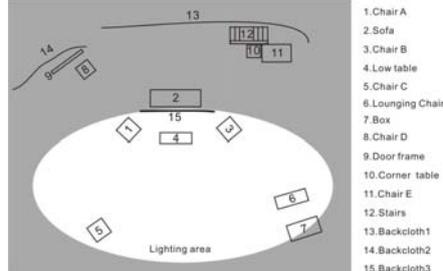
Fig.10 Layout of the Lus' room, *Thunderstorm (1993)*

1.Chair
2.Chair
3.Chair
4.Table
5.*Shoujiu*

Fig.11 A paradigm, *dazuo kuayi*

1.Chair
3.Chair
4.Table
5.*Shoujiu*
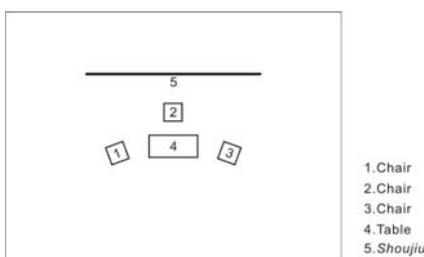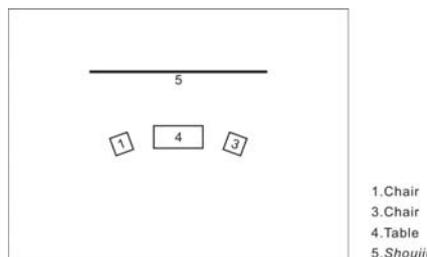
Fig.12 A paradigm, *bazi kuayi*

Moreover, properties in *Thunderstorm (1993)* became multivalent. A lamp-hanger chair was an example. In Chou's room, it referred to a realistic chair on which actress sat. However, in Lu's room it suddenly "turned" from a chair to a part of window frame after the actress moved it. The actress' performance and lighting revealed this change of the signified. For example, she "closed" the imagined window above the back of chair, and at the same time the light dimmed as if a real window was closed (Fig.13). Using properties in such a way is a theatrical technique of traditional Chinese opera as well. The referents of some properties in traditional Chinese opera are not fixed. "One table and two chairs" in traditional Chinese opera may represent different things during the performance. For instance, with the implications of actor's gestures, a table can represent a rampart; and when chairs are set back to back aside the table, they can represent a bridge or a mountain.

In a word, the scenography of *thunderstorm (1993)* cooperated with traditional Chinese opera, which was a significant agent of vernacular Chinese aesthetics. The new scenography was noticeably featured by neutral scenic background, minimized props, and multivalent settings. These traits manifested that Chinese directors and scenographers actually pursued a new Chinese theatricality which derived from traditional Chinese opera to some extent. Although the initial purpose of modern Chinese drama is to fight against traditional Chinese opera, it allied with its Chinese rival, traditional Chinese opera, in *Thunderstorm (1993)* by adopting its vernacular theatrical techniques.

2.2.2 *Thunderstorm (2004)*

During the heydays of economic reform, another kind of new Chinese theatricality emerged in scenographies. In 2004, Thunderstorm was re-directed by a famous Chinese director Chen Xinyi (Fig.14). This play was advertised as an "all-star version" because all the roles, including those supporting roles, were played by movie stars, TV stars, and famous singers. Its box office was so successful that it earned almost 2 million *yuan* (RMB) in Shanghai. [21]

Fig.13 Ssu-feng closes the "window" in the Lus' room

Fig.14 Scenography of *Thunderstorm(2004)*   Fig.15 Delicate bureau & costume

The scenography of *Thunderstorm (2004)* was not as avant-garde as it was in *Thunderstorm (1993)*; it turned back to the realism.   Nonetheless, the realism it achieved seemed "unreal"; it was much more magnificent and more aestheticized than that before 2000.   The props of *Thunderstorm (2004)* were extremely delicate in finishing and details.   The western-styled sofa on the stage was fabricated with exquisitely carved embossment and luxurious patterned fabric.   Even some inconspicuous ones on the back were well-made as well.   The bureau which stood at the corner of stage was made with fine finishing and luxurious decoration called mother-of-pearl inlay (Fig.15).   The costumes, especially these on the female, were fine and sensuous.   The heroine, Fan Yi, wore a fit and glossy black cheongsam with exquisite and glistening textures, which outlined her female body clearly.   The lighting was saturated so that an aesthetical atmosphere was attained.   Comparing to the realistic props, costumes and lighting in *Thunderstorm (1954)*, the ones used in *Thunderstorm (2004)* were obviously more visually refined and aestheticized.   It created a realism which is greatly magnificent.   Since many small but costly details in props and costumes were actually not so noticeable in a big theatre for most of the audiences, the great efforts for refining them showed a certain degree of surplus and beautification.   Even the play itself, which was casted all by famous stars, was a manifestation of this trend.

The excessive fineness of the props, costumes and even the female body, on the one hand, were pursuits of the summit of "magnificent realism" artistically; on the other hand, they implied a relation with global consumer culture.   In the post-reform China, the emergent global consumer culture has changed Chinese aesthetics to a large extent.   The Chinese, especially the young, adjust themselves to the "modern" tastes and concepts of consumer culture.   Images of sexy and slim female body in fashion magazines are favored by the public.   The spectacles of luxurious homes which are promoted by advertisements dominate the imagination of an "ideal Chinese home".   The over-aestheticized daily life in commercial advertisements is embraced by everybody.   The lust for a supreme and beautified material life has already become a predominant ideology and aesthetics in post-reform China.   Since many symptoms of consumer culture could be observed in the scenography of *Thunderstorm (2004)*, it suggests that the scenography has cooperated with consumer culture and created a kind of magnificent theatricality to meet audience's eyes consciously or unconsciously.

2.3 Changing scenographies and the post-reform China

The cooperation between scenography and vernacular Chinese aesthetics or global consumer culture was not only an artistic or a cultural choice; in fact, it was a complicated compromise between political and economic factors also.

Politics is always a considerable issue to scenography.   In the pre-reform period, according to Chairman Mao's view of arts, art should fit into the revolution as a powerful weapon. [13]   Realism was then declared as "the only positive style" and "fundamental rule" by Chinese Communist Party. [10]   Adopting realistic design was almost the only choice for the scenography of *Thunderstorm (1954)*.   However, this "fundamental rule" collapsed in the post-reform China.   Due to China's open-door policy, nonrealistic western theatre theories and techniques, such as those of Brecht, were introduced to China.   Since some of the western nonrealistic theatres were once inspired by traditional Chinese opera, theatre artists began to reevaluate traditional Chinese opera as a precious legacy for modern Chinese drama. [7]   Some directors soon started to experiment both western and

Chinese nonrealistic theatre forms. However, the experiments were not smooth. The "campaign against spiritual pollution" in 1983 and the "anti-bourgeois liberalization" campaign during 1986 to 1987 impeded the experiments on western theatres. Theatre artists had to adopt the Chinese nonrealistic traditions to continue their artistic exploration. [7] Fortunately, their practices which absorb traditional Chinese arts were favored by Chinese government to some extent. In 1990, Party leader Li Ruihuan declared that Chinese nation should make greater contribution to world culture and generate good works of culture and art having Chinese characteristics. [7] Adopting nonrealistic traditional Chinese opera to create the national dramas met the policy. Thus, applying traditional Chinese opera techniques gained relatively more freedom in both artistic and political practices in 1990s. In 2000s, China focused more on economic construction and became more open. Since political controls on the experiments of western theatres were alleviated, almost all kinds of theatre forms (no matter the realistic or the nonrealistic, the Chinese or the western) were permitted. Theatre form was no longer a problem for scenography of modern Chinese drama. Thus, the new Chinese theatricality was a result of political compromise.

The economic dimension is another considerable factor besides the political one. The slashed subsidies and increasingly self-sufficient enforced the theatre to emphasize the earnings. Adjusting dramas to the taste of audience could bring better profits. Since TV and movies, which pushed the realism to a summit, soon became too familiar to the audience, new forms of performances were expected by the public who kept searching for the newness. In order to attract the audience, Chinese directors and scenographers began to pursue theatricality. The first kind of theatricality favored by scenographers was nonrealistic styles. Since traditional Chinese opera has been a popular nonrealistic theatre in China for hundreds of years, its techniques and scenography were borrowed to meet Chinese audience's tastes. Moreover, because the techniques of traditional Chinese opera only ask for minimum settings for a performance, the cost of props and transportation for performances or traveling performances are much lowered. It is helpful to maximize the profits from the economic view. The second kind of theatricality embraced by scenographers is theatre spectacle. The audience in consumer society is always looking for novel experiences. Keeping on consuming new spectacles becomes a new fetish in modern age. To meet audience's desire on spectacles, Chinese scenographers are inclined to create unreal space in theatre. Allying with the enthusiasm for the luxurious and the over-aestheticized, magnificent spectacles are greatly favored. Theatre is thus become an ideal site where spectacles are consumed collectively. Thus, the new Chinese theatricality was also a result of economic compromise.

In short, cooperation between scenography and vernacular Chinese aesthetics or global consumer culture was a result of complex compromise among many powers, such as political, economic and cultural factors. The balance of the powers was in flux but remained stable temporarily. If one of these powers changed, new theories and approaches of Chinese scenography would be explored unceasingly.

3. Conclusions

By adopting scenography semiotics, which is adapted from theatre semiotics and especially designed for systemic and comprehensive scenography studies, the paper reveals that scenography of modern Chinese drama cooperates with vernacular Chinese aesthetics and global consumer culture to create new Chinese theatricality in

post-reform China.　It discloses that in 1990s the scenography of *Thunderstorm* pursues a new Chinese theatrical technique, which derives from traditional Chinese opera to some extent.　And in 2000s the scenography of *Thunderstorm* pursues a "magnificent realism", which is an alliance between global consumer culture and realism.　The shifting scenographies of *Thunderstorm* were productions of political, economic and cultural factors in post-reform China.

(Fig.1,5,6 are captured from the video *Thunderstorm*, by Beijing People's Art Theatre; Fig.2,7,8,13 are captured from the video *Thunderstorm*, by China Youth Art Theatre; Fig.3,14,15 are images deriving from the website www.thmz.com and later edited by the author.)

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