

Introduction

Cao Yu (or Ts'ao Yu, 1910-1996) was the foremost pioneer of modern drama in China. As his life and career exemplify the dilemmas and difficulties faced by generations of Chinese intellectuals throughout the twentieth century, this exhibition serves also as a narrative of modern China.

In rejection of China's indigenous tradition of song-and-dance theatre, enthusiastic young radicals in the early twentieth century had begun to develop a more "civilized theatre" on the Western model called "spoken drama". However, despite being promoted as representing the spirit of a changing society, spoken drama had struggled to compete against the established indigenous operatic genres and the increasingly popular movie industry. In the 1930s, the plays of Cao Yu emerged as the saviour of the movement since their plots and characters possessed immediate and widespread appeal to Chinese audiences. His work helped spoken drama gain a permanent place in contemporary Chinese culture.

Often compared to Shakespeare, Ibsen, Chekhov and O'Neill, Cao Yu gained canonical status in China due to the artistry of his writing and the skilful fusion of contemporary political and social themes in his early plays. His powerful portrayal of people and exploration of human complexity still touch the hearts of twenty-first-century audiences. Cao Yu is the only spoken drama playwright whose works have been constantly revived since they were first staged in the 1930s.

Cao Yu – original name Wan Jiabao – was born into an upper-class family. His natural mother died three days after his birth, a loss he felt deeply all his life. Describing himself as a lonely little boy living in a huge tall-ceilinged mansion, Cao Yu existed through the stories told to him by his nanny, a poor woman from the countryside, and in the world of his own imagination. He became alert to the behaviour of adults, especially how people's attitudes towards his parents changed according to their wealth or poverty. Childhood loneliness in this cold home environment had left him prone to depression, and as a young man he increasingly perceived the alienation of the individual in confrontation with the external world. His exploration of this theme was at the heart of much of his writing. An acute observer of human life, Cao Yu created all his characters on the basis of his own experience. Chinese artists of his generation could not afford to indulge in art for art's sake.

In 1930, he gave up his study of politics, and entered the Department of Western Languages and Literatures at Tsinghua University in Beijing. At the age of twenty-three, he completed his first work: the ground-breaking spoken drama *Thunderstorm*, which was published in 1934. Chinese students in Tokyo performed a Japanese translation in 1935 before the play's professional premiere in China later that year. *Thunderstorm* became China's most important modern play and established the prestige and popularity of spoken drama in the 1930s. Over the next ten years, Cao Yu's playwriting flourished in spite of the disruption of the Second Sino-Japanese War, and his plays gained international recognition being staged in many cities including Moscow and Tokyo. In 1946, invited by the U.S. State Department, Cao Yu, along with novelist Lao She, lectured in the United States.

Communist victory in 1949 ended China's years of civil war. Thereafter – apart from the Cultural Revolution period (1966-76) – Cao Yu held numerous high official positions right up to his death in 1996: president of the Beijing People's Art Theatre (China's most prestigious spoken drama company) from 1952; chairman of the All-China Dramatic Workers' Association from 1978; deputy of the National People's Congress from 1954, and member of its standing committee from 1978. Yet his creativeness was eroded by the ever-shifting political climate and he wrote only three plays during the last five decades of his life.

