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Review of stage@leedstouring, *The Sun is Not for Us*

Shanghai International Contemporary Theater Festival, Nov. 2012)

Adele Lee (University of Greenwich)

Elegant, understated and deeply moving, *The Sun is Not for Us* condenses and weaves together four plays by the oft-hailed ‘father of modern Chinese drama (huàjù)’, Cao Yu: *Thunderstorm* (*Leiyu*, 1933), *Sunrise* (*Richu*, 1936), *The Wilderness* (*Yuanya*, 1937) and *The Family* (*Jiā*, 1941). All of these dramas are primarily concerned with issues of domestic abuse and oppression and with the relationship between the individual and society. Particular attention in *The Sun is Not for Us* though is given to the fate of Yu’s female characters who are bound, both figuratively and literally, by the strictures of patriarchy and feudalism. The performance opens, poignantly, with the hideous image of ‘lotus feet’ – the name ironically given to the bound and therefore deformed feet of Chinese women. In this sense, the production is a feminist adaptation of Yu’s works, and draws attention to the May Fourth intellectual’s ‘sympathetic interest in the fate of women [and the poor] in modern China’ (Denton, 449). The writer once said,

‘I very rarely depict a female villain. I have great sympathy for the fairer sex. Almost all my women characters are more or less sympathetic... I’m a great supporter of Women’s Lib!’ (quoted in Mao Dun, 50).

It cannot but be significant that Cao Yu also frequently played female roles during his years as an actor, earning him the title 'flower of the Nankai drama troupe'.

The women in *The Sun is Not for Us* are all victims to varying degrees, and often deceived, deserted and destroyed by the men in their lives: Bailu (originally from *Sunrise*) is compelled, by both her rejection at the hands of her lover and her desire for fun and material wealth, to become a courtesan; Fanyi (*Thunderstorm*) is seduced by her stepson and goes insane when he falls in love with the family maid who turns out to be his own sister; and Jinzi (*The Wilderness*) is mistreated by her mother-in-law, trapped in a loveless marriage, and pays dearly for eloping with her former lover. It was ambitious, however, to imagine this amount of drama could be crammed into the space of one hour (or indeed one play) and the main shortcoming of this production is that it is simply too fast-paced. As a result, it is easy to become disoriented and difficult, particularly for those unfamiliar with Cao Yu's *oeuvre*, to extract one story from another. Then again, history is a confusing jumble of events and cacophony of voices and the fact none of the women in *The Sun is Not for Us* are granted enough stage time to develop fully their individual plights and personalities is quite appropriate.¹ By condensing the action, *The Sun is Not for Us* serves to demonstrate the ways in which women have/are deprived of the spotlight and rarely allowed the opportunity to shine. The production, intentionally or otherwise, effectively underlines the extent to which women in China have historically been subjugated and forced into the shadows: the practice of foot-binding, after all, literally prevented them from leaving the house.

Oddly, though, all the women in *The Sun is Not for Us* performed barefoot which implies a certain freedom of movement and slightly jars against the opening scene in which they are shown undergoing the painful process of foot-binding. Being without shoes, on the other hand, also serves to illustrate the extent to which women were confined to the home and did not socialise outside of its parameters. In addition to being barefoot the women were attired in plain, white dresses making them appear humble, innocent and almost spectre-like. One is tempted to think of them as hungry ghosts: half living, half dead, and constantly yearning for love and fulfilment. The dimly-lit stage, which lent the production the kind of mystical aura Cao Yu favoured in works like *The Wilderness*, as

¹Cao Yu himself, by 'using the trope of female emancipation as a signifier for the emancipation of the individual', may in fact have 'stripped women of their unique identity and subjectivity' (Denton, 449).

well as the soft and haunting music, added to the sense of the tragic heroines' almost ethereal existence. The problem with representing female subordination and suffering, though, is that one always risks reproducing the victimisation of women. As Amy D. Dooling puts it, 'how can a dramatist depict an exploited woman without inscribing her as passive and pitiful? For, representation will always involve reconfiguration or disfiguration at some level [thereby enacting a sort of "violence"]' (56).

This is as true of Cao Yu's original work as it is of *The Sun is Not for Us* which, in its portrayal of female suffering runs the risk of inadvertently re-inscribing images of female pathos and disempowerment. Nevertheless, the talented young actresses from the University of Leeds who embodied the parts did so with such conviction that they elicited as much admiration as they did sympathy from the audience. The cast as a whole, belonging to the stage@leedstouring theatre company which devised the production under the auspices of professional director, David Jiang, should be praised for their onstage rapport, naturalistic acting style and ability to play multiple parts (though the latter unfortunately contributed somewhat to the confusion, at times). This British, mainly Caucasian group also managed to play 'Chinese characters' without making an issue of it and without altering their performance or appearance to seem racially different. Their names and the occasional use of props such as Oriental fans and paper lanterns were the only generically 'Chinese' aspects of the production.

Opting for a sophisticated, minimalistic approach, the company clearly aimed and successfully managed to repackage Cao Yu for a global, twenty-first century audience as well as present his works as 'universal' or, at least, capturing something of the 'human essence'. Thus *The Sun is Not for Us* can be regarded as a transcultural object in the sense that it seems to transcend limited nationalism and is

'constituted through the bridging of several cultures more or less radically separated in time and space, by borrowing themes, forms, ideologies, etc. from various cultures' (Roubine quoted in Pavis, 6).

This is apt given the wonderfully intertextual nature of Cao Yu's drama and the fact many of his plays are rich tapestries already threaded with transnational/transtemporal themes and motifs from Aristotle, Henrik Ibsen, Eugene O'Neill, Shakespeare and traditional Peking opera (*jingju*). By subtly mixing and matching theatrical conventions, including dance and shadow theatre, setting the action in an indeterminate time and place (with the exception of the opening scene), and keeping the production relatively free of Oriental flourishes, the company successfully subscribed to the transcultural aesthetic of Yu himself.

What is particularly refreshing and timely about *The Sun is Not for Us*, of course, is the fact that it is based on the works of a renowned Chinese playwright and performed by a British theatre group. For, while we have all become fairly familiar with Chinese versions of Western Classics, with stage adaptations of Shakespeare's works, to take an obvious example, by East Asian companies, forming a staple on the international theatre festival scene, rarely has the exchange worked in the reverse direction and most people in the Anglophone world still struggle to name more than a handful of canonical Chinese writers. To see a group of British students appreciate and actively engage with Cao Yu was a welcome change, suggesting that the global cultural axis is indeed tilting evermore eastward. The project, initiated by Yu's stepdaughter, Ruru Li, also falls in line with the British government-backed drive to increase the number of young people in the UK either studying Chinese culture or taking courses in China. Hopefully, then, *The Sun is Not for Us* marks the start of many more such collaborations in the future.

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Physical Aesthetics in *The Sun is Not for Us* 9 November 2012

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http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4a8e76ee0101ctb1.html

The Sun is Not for Us is a modern theatrical work of retrospection. It connects many difficult situations of different kinds for female characters in history by adopting the method of presenting fragments from different plays. . Just as we have seen in the play, the worries

and destinies of women can be seen from the performance of gender relations. Through this premise, this play is endowed with a complex poetic value across different contexts, instead of wholly falling into the thinking of “desire, morals, body and ethics”.

In aesthetics, *The Sun is Not for Us* is both generalized and abstract since it is expressed through the combination of different fragments. It moves away from the original script which is detailed and linear. The current work is transformed into a new drama with subjective theatrical expressions and characteristics. This show is not a simple re-enacting or restructuring of Cao Yu's play but is a drama about modern thinking created by both the director and the cast. It has a strong post-modernist style. Its essence is found in the physical forms used, which have the following three features.

The first one is juxtaposition. There is much juxtaposition in the drama. Juxtaposition of different plays in that segments of four dramas are interwoven on the stage thus producing new insights; juxtaposition of dialogue and dance; juxtaposition of performances on the stage and group performances at the back of the stage and in outline; juxtaposition of static and dynamic images.

The second is ceremonies. For example, Fanyi's drinking of the medicine is endowed with new meaning distilled through metaphorical stage language. With a flawless combination of rhythm, lighting and bodies (instead of dialogues and conflicts), silent bodies obtain new meaning which can be observed through their posture. It is bodies rather than dialogue which express desire and eagerness. I also noticed that sometimes there are repetitions of gestures, like a group of statues. For example, eight female characters holding white silks (foot wrappings) repeatedly practice and imitate hanging. A ceremonial and ritual sense is produced between recalling and revisiting the past, between virtual real feelings. From my perspective, such moments and freeze-frames ceremonially stage the making of a statue. At the last moment, the statue is finished and the theme emerges. .

The third feature is the deliberately self-conscious use of fragments. “Two dimensional and three-dimensional images”, “the statics and the dynamic” are well organized. Yet this organization is not a simple binary opposition. For example, tensions and a strange sense of both watching and acting are produced through the concurrent movement of the actors on stage and the broadcasting of video images. This space/time is confusing and ambiguous, meaning that a third dimension is added, just like the concept of “the third space-time” put forward by Edward Soga. Thus, the random insertion of multimedia, film and recordings does not need too much description or rationalising, since it provides for a combination of emotions as well as playing a dynamic role in the staging of the play. Obviously, with

these physical aesthetics the use of fragments becomes highly self-conscious.

Summing up the above - mentioned several points, I think this production has poetic value and has achieved great success, its surrealism adding to its tragedy.

**A review of *The Sun is Not for Us*
Shanghai 2012
by Wu, Qiong PhD student**

I was at the opening show of the Shanghai International Contemporary Theatre Festival 2012 to see *The Sun Is Not for Us*, a performance delivered by a cast of English students from the University of Leeds. As soon as I saw a rakish Zhou Yu walking briskly toward an impassioned Sifeng, I realised that my established vision of Cao Yu's work would be challenged that night. Despite their purpose of broadcasting the name of Cao Yu and Chinese theatre on the international stage, it seems that the production team of *The Sun*, including Li Ruru and director Jiang Weiguo (Dr David Jiang), did not intend to deliver another orthodox performance of Cao Yu. In fact, *The Sun* was not claimed as an adaptation of Cao Yu, instead, this production was a 'devised work' inspired by four classical plays of Cao Yu. The students in the cast were asked to input their own opinions into the production process, making their own decisions on the structure, the character, and the theatricality. In a certain sense, the author of the play is not Cao Yu anymore, but the director and the fifteen English students.

However, although there is no ideal iteration of any play towards which one can or should strive, this is not to say that at any given time it is impossible to identify productions that are regarded as more relevant or irrelevant in relation to an understanding of the 'original' author. The questions now are, if an a priori master narrative can be viewed as existing, how can a specific production, such as *The Sun* maintain a distance from this master work? How can we situate a new play in the process of continuing interpretation between an original dramatic work and its subsequent productions?

From Linda Hutcheon to Margaret Jane Kidnie, recent researches on adaptation theories began to notice the distinction of adapting drama from literature. The relationship between script and performance is not the same as that between novel and film, because unlike novel, drama is generically situated at the intersection of text and performance, and in this sense forestalling any identification of a dramatic work as an object, but more like a process. For example, certain properties seem essential in Cao Yu's classical work—the lightning in *Thunderstorm*, the death of 'little thing' in *Sunrise*, the soliloquy of Juexin on his wedding night in *Family*. However, all of these 'essential' properties could be challenged or disputed in production, in turn potentially generating further modifications to the popular consensus about the nature of the original work.

In fact, looking back in history, it is not difficult to find cases when Cao Yu's scripts were changed, and rewritten by him or other people to suit the changing social and political context. The criteria of judging the 'authenticity' has also changed over time. There are at least five published versions of *Thunderstorm* and one version deemed as 'genuine' at one time may not be assumed so in another time. The most noticeable changes in *Thunderstorm* were made in the 1951 version with several main characters, such as Zhou Ping and Lu Dahai, changed to emphasise the class conflicts, and denounce the hypocritical morality of the bourgeois family. Although these changes were later revoked in 1957, other modifications were made in this version. The first and last act were slashed by the author to reduce the mystic, fatalist feeling whilst increasing the realistic features then advocated by the authorities. *Sunrise* also has been through various rewritings. During its performance in Shanghai in 1937, the director Ouyang Yuqian decided to remove all scenes taking place in the brothel as he thought they were discordant with the other parts of the play, and inappropriate to be staged at that time. In the 1951 version, the character 'little thing' was brought back to life by Fang Dasheng and factory workers, to demonstrate the strength of the unity of students and the working class. After the Cultural Revolution and the open-door policy, these versions of Cao Yu were abandoned and earlier versions of Cao Yu's work in the 1920s and 1930s were restored and reprinted. It is therefore often an illusion to assume one fixed, inviolable entity as a dramatic work.

Even if we could find one widely acknowledged and comparatively stable version of Cao Yu's script, is performing the complete, word-to-word version the only way to be faithful to the classics? Does 'being faithful to the text' equate to 'being faithful to the author'? This problem gets even more complicated when Cao Yu's work were adapted by other media forms such as television or film. The popularity of

famous film or TV adaptations greatly changed audiences' perception of Cao Yu's work and established stable criteria for them to rely on in the future. For many Chinese audiences like me, our expectation of Cao Yu has, in a certain sense, been filtered and set by these canonical presentations, such as Su Min's Zhou Ping, GuYongfei's Fan Yi, and Fang Shu's Chen Bailu. The characters in *The Sun*, on the other hand, were performed more closely to the English students' perception of Chinese people in the early twentieth century. Watching their performance is somewhat like watching a picture through the eyes of another person. You can hardly tell which vision is more accurate because we each gained our knowledge through different media/productions/presentations, whilst the concept of Cao Yu's work itself is never a fixed object, but can and should be transformed with the change of time and space.

Of all Chinese dramatists in the early twentieth century, Cao Yu stands out for his compassion for women's fate and his strength in depicting complex female characters. *The Sun* cleverly dealt with Cao Yu's texts from the point of view of the oppressed women and by doing so condensed the performance into a one and half hour play. By stripping away most of the social and historical background, the plight and struggle of women in domestic milieu came into the foreground of the play. In terms of *mise-en-scène* in *The Sun*, the deployments of video projections and some film techniques not only gave the production more dramatic tension and contemporary feeling, but also helped to accentuate the theme of the play: the fight of the disadvantaged identity against the oppressive canon. For example, the close-up shots of the female performer's crying face was projected on the screen at the same time as the actress performed the role of a Chinese lady Fanyi, which immediately created a sense of universality of women's oppressed life across the globe. I particularly admired the ensemble of the whole cast and repetition of their embrace, pushing, crying and separation in the beginning and at the end of the play. Just like the overture and finale in an opera, these movements concisely introduced and concluded the synopsis of the whole play, and the intense music accompanying those movements in the end further pushed the play toward its climax.

The use of white ribbon was another prominent feature, and, beyond my expectation, a creation of the students. The ribbon had multiple uses: in the beginning of the play, all female characters stood on the stage and male characters began to wrap the ribbons around them; in the following acts of the play, ribbons were artful decorations on the actresses' costumes, as waistband or corsage; while in the last scene all female performers danced gracefully with the ribbons in their hands, and slowly tied them around their necks to imply their suicide. The ribbon therefore gained a symbolic meaning as human relationship or destiny, and the use of it throughout the play

provided *The Sun* with a coherent theme. Despite being in different locations and with different social status, the fates of the female characters were all destined—by the men they loved, by the love they could not get, and by the women’s own frailty.

As the female characters hung themselves with the ribbon, on the screen appeared the most famous lines of Cao Yu’s *Sunrise* and the concluding lines of the play:

*The sun has risen; the darkness was left behind,
But the sun is not for us, we are going to sleep.*

Peacefully but powerfully, the motif of oppressed women was again emphasised. ‘*We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark; the real tragedy of life is when men are afraid of the light.*’ The fear of darkness for children is human nature, for which they have no choice and hence no guilt or responsibility, but the fear of daylight can only happen when one is in deep despair, and chooses to leave all hope and happiness behind, staying alone in the darkness. *The Sun* manifested such love, struggle, hatred and desperation of eight women characters. Because of this play’s women-centred perspective, *The Sun* did not merely exploit Cao Yu’s works to its own ends, but attempted to return to the classics via this rearrangement of Cao Yu’s four plays.

By now, *The Sun* has been performed in several different cities across the UK and China. Audiences with different expectations and cultural backgrounds may have given different reviews. For those audiences who had no past experience with Cao Yu or Chinese theatre, they are more likely to identify this play as an original production, and appreciate the play for its artistic unity. Unlike these audiences, audiences who might be quite familiar with Cao Yu came to the theatre in the hope to watch something new. Modification to the plot and characters would be expected and were well received by them. As a result, their experience of watching this interpretation of Cao Yu triggered a relationship of exchange, and a dynamic process of production in which Cao Yu’s classics seemed to respond to, and grow with, the play. Finally, for those who had a rich knowledge of Cao Yu and Chinese theatre, and expected to watch a classical production, they might have found it quite difficult to acknowledge *The Sun* as a production of Cao Yu’s work and confer it with authenticity. However, just by challenging any implicit consensus about what shapes Cao Yu’s classics; one can begin to look at it from an alternative perspective. So one might be able to locate in these critiques what is at this moment considered as constituting the seemingly essence of the work, and so Cao Yu’s classics again survive through performance.

The Sun is Not for Us, but this Play is for the World

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A passionate theatre fan, or an ambitious producer, or a careful scholar of Chinese drama, may at some point ask the following question. If the heroes and beauties created by Shakespeare's pen have, time and again, been resurrected on the global stage in a myriad of casting possibilities designed to highlight feminist, post colonialist, and interculturalist approaches to race and gender--then why not employ a similar ideological approach when it comes to staging the men and women depicted in Cao Yu's plays? If such provocative appropriations of Shakespearean plays enhance more than degrade the halo of world theatre classics, how might a similar approach directed toward Cao Yu's works fare? Would it likewise enhance Cao Yu's standing within global theatre? The University of Leeds' production, *The Sun is Not for Us*, staged in Edinburgh and Shanghai in 2012, serves as an apt case for such inquiries. It marks a daring attempt at staging Cao Yu, and by extension, China, on the global stage.

The Sun does not belong to the conventionally defined repertoire of Cao Yu. Rather, it is a creative selection, juxtaposition, and synthesis of excerpts from Cao Yu's signature plays--*Thunderstorm* (1933), *Sunrise* (1936), *The Wilderness* (1937), and *Family* (1942) that have been jointly assembled by David Jiang (director) and student-actors and student-technicians. The title, *The Sun is Not for Us*, alludes to the monologue that Chen Bailu, the female protagonist in *Sunrise*, delivers in despair before her suicide: "The sun has set, leaving behind the darkness. But the sun is not for us, we are about to sleep." The "us" in Chen Bailu's monologue refers to women whose reputations were blemished with the label of promiscuity and allegorically points to all victimized women in 1930s China. In contrast, the "us", or female characters in *The Sun*, embody a wider frame of reference--that of women in general.

The play's ardent concern for staging women's victimized bodies and souls is delivered without ambiguity; so too is the interpretative lens that Leeds students applied to read Cao Yu. The director and actors of this production are also professors and students of Cao Yu's drama literature. After they studied Cao Yu's four plays for an entire academic term, the director and students selected four pairs of relationships for adaptation and performance in sequence. These are: Ruiyu (live on stage) and Cousin Mei (projected on screen) sharing a wedding night with Juexin, a submissive son but a cowardly lover from *Family*; Jinzi showing her tolerance of her mother-in-law's abuse and touching desire for Chouhu in *The Wilderness*; a juxtaposition of two pairs of male master and female servant romances—Zhou Ping and Sifeng from *Thunderstorm* plus Juehui and Mingfeng from *Family*; and what is *The Sun*'s boldest adaptation, the taboo relationship between Zhou Ping and Fan Yi in *Thunderstorm*. In this final excerpt, it is Zhou Ping, instead of Zhou Puyuan, who violently forces Fan Yi to drink the medicine. Finally, Chen Bailu not only slides down the social ladder from student to social butterfly; but is further forced to transform her body to that of a nakedly objectified commodity measured only by money. Throughout the play, these feminine subjects (women and sometimes men) are subjugated to a series of masculine symbols: patriarchal power, libido, knowledge (textual and medical), and capital. Clearly, *The Sun* aspires to participate in the discourse of women, gender, and sexuality in Republican China that continues to generate excitement and anxiety.

Usually, crowding so many episodes into a single production would burden unprepared spectators who might know little of Cao Yu's works, particularly those who come from different cultural backgrounds. But *The Sun* is spared from such misfortune, partly due to its impressive choreography and creative use of ribbons, which are enhanced by a minimalist stage set and abstract costumes. Before the delivery of any of Cao Yu's lines, four pairs of female characters pose in silence and then dance to mimic the process of foot-binding, one of the most efficient cultural registers for the image of victimized women in China. In contrast to the women's aestheticized movements of foot-binding stands a projection of a black-and-white picture of a pair of bounded feet. Such an image of pathologically distorted and tortured feet, though it risks being clichéd, assures that the play's concern for women's victimized bodies and minds is clearly conveyed to its audience. Likewise, the student choreographers and costume designers aim to make ribbons a cross-cultural reference to women's suffering bodies, Chinese foot-binding and European waist-binding. Right after showing this visually and mentally disturbing image, male actors join the female actors on stage, liberating ribbons from feet and using different gestures to suggest the relationship between

individual actors. By first presenting such straightforward gestures and striking images, *The Sun* well prepares spectators for the forthcoming fates of Cao Yu's characters.

It is worth mentioning that the play's specific staging processes, such as using ribbons as the predominant stage props as well as employing silent poses as the main stage movement, are all relatively easy to manufacture, rehearse, and control. This is extremely significant for student productions that tend to deal with strict budgets and inexperienced actors. Compared to a splendid spectacle of complicated movement design, the simple but creative combination of dynamic ribbons and still projection of bound feet is more reliable for an artistically controllable performance such as a student production. Strikingly, the student-actors and technicians were fully engaged throughout the entire process of production, from editing and revising the script, to the mise-en-scene, and eventually to the final performance. Students' cross-cultural understanding and performative skills were mutually enhanced by their first hand experiences in reading the drama literature and the theatre performance. As one of many senior and fellow scholars specializing in modern Chinese drama study in academia, I am particularly positive towards multidisciplinary projects that encompass dramaturgic, theatrical, and cultural approaches to Chinese plays. In that regard, *The Sun is Not for Us* provides an informative and inspiring model.