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The Avant-Garde and the Traditional in *Wotou Huiguan*

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Abstract

Wotou Huiguan is seen as a typical example of experimental theatre in China since the 20th century, and it combines new-style exploration with traditional inheritance; taking this play as the research object, this paper studies how the work creates a distancing effect under the guidance of Brecht's "epic theatre" theory, while the study is carried out from two sides, namely directorial treatment and dramatic content, and it also shows how the play follows the three basic rules of classical realism; the play does not give more attention to one side and ignore the other, instead, it carefully brings together new stage methods and realistic ideas of creation, so the reason why it succeeds lies mainly in the balance between content and form; this combined way effectively avoids the problem of experimental theatre losing its literary base and pushing audiences away, and because some current experimental works only chase new forms and give up content expression, the creative practice of this play still has important reference value and provides useful lessons for today's theatre creation.

Keywords

Wotou Huiguan; realistic theatre; experimental theatre

Modern Chinese spoken drama has seen about five stages in its growth, the first stage was wenmingxi, or civilised drama, in the late Qing and early Republic years, and after that came the 1920s and 1930s, then the third stage was the left-wing theatre movement during the 1930s and 1940s; from 1949 onward, socialist realism turned into the main rule for artistic creation, and starting in the 1980s, especially from the 1990s to the early 2000s, small theatre, also called experimental theatre, began to show up.

The play *Wotou Huiguan* was created by Liu Heng, an experienced playwright, and it clearly belongs to this latest stage; however, the term "little theatre" in this case does not only mean a small performance space, like a small auditorium, but it is connected with the wider idea of "experimental theatre", which refers to a purposeful break from old rules, the acceptance of different styles, attention to inner feelings, and a common way of looking back at history through daily life; because of this, *Wotou Huiguan* shows the experimental spirit of its time, while it still uses traditional story materials and Beijing local culture, and this illustrates the rich tension between the avant-garde and the tradition of Chinese drama. In Collected Essays on Little Theatre Drama, Tian Benxiang writes: "Little theatre drama" -its original English term is Experimental theatre. A more accurate Chinese translation would be "Shiyan Xiju" (Wang & Tian, 2002). Then what exactly is our experimental theatre supposed to be? In the 1990s, experimental theatre and theatrical experimentation in China can be roughly divided into three types, or three categories. The first category is characterized by a strong subjective colouring in the works, intended to convey certain ideas of the creators. The second category emphasizes the provision of psychological and emotional experiences to the audience. The third category tends to be more extreme: they neither intend to convey any ideas nor provide any psychological or

emotional impact or infection; instead, what they offer the audience is a complete muddle (Li, 1999). The experimental theatre movement first emerged in France, initiated by a group of theatre practitioners who spontaneously organised small-scale, experimental performances in opposition to the commercialisation of mainstream theatre (Liu & Sun, 2024). During the period from 1990 to 2010, experimental theatre was still dominated by the first two categories. For example, Absolute Signal, The Lover, Si Fan, Rhinoceros in Love-all belong to the first category. The second category, or a fusion of the first and second categories, also appeared. Of course, the third category was not absent either; for instance, Mou Sen's Zero File is a representative of the third category. However, compared with the first two categories, successful productions of the third category that have been staged and circulated are extremely few.

Wotou Huiguan is a landmark work in the trajectory of Chinese experimental theatre. Unlike some experimental works of the same period that deliberately distanced themselves from literary values, disregarded audience reception, and devolved into self-sufficient formalist "circle games", *Wotou Huiguan* demonstrates a clear self-consciousness in returning to the essence of theatrical art. It does not abandon the depth of characterisation, the texture of dialogue, or the realistic restoration of the historical environment; rather, it grounds itself in a solid dramatic structure and vibrant character relationships, anchoring its experimental spirit in the effectiveness of theatrical communication.

Lin Zhaohua has long been committed to exploring and innovating performance techniques. Building upon the Stanislavski system of acting, he also draws upon Brecht's "epic" performance method (Hu, 2026). These two seemingly disparate aesthetic resources are not mechanically combined but mutually permeate each other in the concrete staging and mise-en-scène: the alienating devices do not dissolve social concern, nor does realistic representation stifle space for reflection. It is precisely this dialectical tension between the avant-garde and the classical that endows *Wotou Huiguan*with its distinctive theatrical power and enduring academic vitality.

1. The Avant-Garde in *Wotou Huiguan*: Brecht

In The Street Scene, he (Brecht) discusses "the so‑called alienation effect" as "an effect that makes the events between people appear striking, calling for explanation, not taken for granted, and not simply natural. The aim of this effect is to enable the spectator to make a correct critique from a social perspective" (Zhou, 2008). In Act III of *Wotou Huiguan*, Xiao Pengda bursts into Yuan Guozhong's dwelling, attempting to forcibly take away Zhou Ziping. When refused, he comes into direct conflict with Yuan Jiangmiao, who steps forward to intervene. Xiao Pengda, losing emotional control, threatens to shoot Yuan Jiangmiao. Yuan Guozhong then interposes himself between them and delivers a monologue. This monologue initially addresses Xiao Pengda but gradually turns towards the audience, forming a direct address to the performance space. Meanwhile, the other characters behind Yuan Guozhong remain in a frozen, tableau-like stillness. This "pointed" directorial treatment precisely echoes Brecht's discussion of the alienation effect—it breaks the enclosed communication within the theatre, compelling the audience to disengage from emotional immersion and shift towards a critical examination of social issues. The content of the monologue recounts Yuan Jiangmiao's turbulent life from childhood to adulthood, not only concretely revealing the deep-seated contradictions of the social structure within a specific historical context but also, through the father's narrative perspective, presenting the core of Yuan Jiangmiao's "benevolence and righteousness" as embedded within the destiny of the era.

Brecht's "defamiliarization effect" has four basic points, among which the fourth mainly addresses "the actor and the role, the role and the audience, and the audience and the role."

The alienation effect in the theatre should be understood as a condition and effect in which, during the performance, the actor is "alienated" from the role he or she is playing—the actor never completely transforms into the character; the audience is "alienated" from the actor—they are clearly aware that the person performing on stage is merely "acting" as the character, not the character himself; and the audience is also "alienated" from the role—they do not completely merge emotionally with the characters from any perspective, but maintain a scrutinising and critical attitude towards the figures on stage (Zhou, 2008). Returning to Act III of *Wotou Huiguan*: in the midst of chaos, Xiao Pengda fires his gun and hits Yuan Guozhong. Let us examine the lines of other characters. For instance, Cuilan's line: "Xiao Miaozi, get up, let me undo the buttons on your father's gown." At this moment, however, Yuan Guozhong is moving about on stage, walking from the mid-front area to the centre-stage area. Yuan Jiangmiao's line: Father, don't speak, lean on me and don't speak (Liu, 2024). Yet at this point, Yuan Guozhong is standing and speaking to Yuan Jiangmiao, who is sitting on the ground. It is not difficult to observe that here the actual physical state of Yuan Guozhong does not match the state that is being presented dramatically. At this moment, he should be

leaning on Yuan Jiangmiao, not walking around. Director Lin Zhaohua's design here undoubtedly draws upon the fourth aspect of the "alienation effect" mentioned above. At this point, the actor is alienated from the character he is performing: in this situation, actor He Bing never completely transforms himself into Yuan Guozhong throughout the entire scene. Meanwhile, the audience is also alienated from He Bing as the actor, because under this unconventional, non-realistic performance, the audience can clearly perceive that at this moment He Bing is not Yuan Guozhong, but an actor—or rather, a narrator. Furthermore, since the audience cannot see the true physical state of the character Yuan Guozhong and can only make judgments about him, they are unable to truly "fuse" with the character. In this directorial treatment, Lin Zhaohua practises a "character-to-audience narration": the actors deliver their dialogue with great composure, yet both parties, while speaking their lines, keep their eyes fixed directly on the audience (Li, 2023).

2. The Tradition in *Wotou Huiguan*: "Classical Realism"

Classical realist theatre theory encompasses three core categories—"objective reality," "rational critique," and "the pursuit of freedom and truth"—all of which are systematically realised in the production of *Wotou Huiguan*.

"Objective reality" comprises two dimensions: first, the accurate and faithful representation of the real world (objectivity); second, the reflection of socially problematic issues and external circumstances characteristic of the era (temporality). Regarding stage design, since the late twentieth century experimental theatre has often used few props, heavy makeup, and simple sets, which gives a feeling of "empty space"; but the stage design of *Wotou Huiguan* is clearly different, because when the curtain opens, the audience sees a realistic set that looks like an old Beijing courtyard from the 1940s, with a two-floor loft in the middle, side rooms on both sides, and everyday things like a medicine grinder, chairs, poles for drying, medical plasters, a stove, and a table placed around; these props are not just for decoration; they carefully restore the material life of a certain historical period, and through these objects they confirm the objectivity of social existence; so the play does not follow the various ideas from the West like "theatre of cruelty," "poor theatre," or "environmental theatre" that were popular at that time; instead, it is based on traditional realism's search for "objective reality," and it builds its story foundation through real spatial details.

In classical realism, "rational critique" means both the theatre's role in teaching morals and its deep criticism of the moral decline of the rich class; instead of going into where this idea came from or how it changed over time, the following part looks at how it specifically appears in *Wotou Huiguan*, where Xiao Qishan and his son Xiao Pengda, as clear examples of the rich class, show the cruelty of the system of exploitation through what they do; among the different taxes Xiao Qishan puts on the residents of *Wotou Huiguan*, the "fodder loss surcharge" is especially meaningful, because the word "gan" (干) sounds the same as another word "gan" (甘) that means "sweet" or "willing," but here it refers to animal feed, and this tax makes local people pay for the losses during the transport of horse feed, such as wetness or spilling; this one detail is enough to show how the creators sharply expose the social order that oppresses people, and after Yuan Guozhong gets shot, he says: "Brother Liben, hurry, take a steamed bun and dip it in my blood… Son, your father's hands are unclean but his blood is clean; eat the steamed bun and it will cure your illness," which makes an ironic reference to the historical symbol of "the blood-soaked bun" from Lu Xun's Medicine; this shows both how helpless the lower classes become in such extreme situations, and it also strengthens the moral side of the criticism through the strange expression of fatherly love.

As for "the pursuit of freedom and truth," this theme runs through the action logic of the major characters throughout the play: Yuan Jiangmiao, despite suffering from lung disease, persists in writing pamphlets for his students; Tian Cuilan sacrifices herself to raise her children; Zhou Ziping joins the student movement in pursuit of social progress; Yuan Guozhong, though attached to money, venerates Guan Gong (the deified general symbolising loyalty and righteousness), reflecting the lower classes' adherence to morality and faith. Although these characters exist amid material deprivation and threats to their survival, they never abandon their quest for individual freedom and social truth, fully embodying classical realism's affirmation of human dignity and historical conviction.

Overall, *Wotou Huiguan* exhibits distinctive avant-garde experimental features in its performance vocabulary and directorial staging, while its dramatic core is deeply rooted in the aesthetic tradition of classical realism. Compared with many experimental plays of the same period, the success of this work is no accident—it does not abandon literariness or audience reception for the sake of formal innovation; rather, it seeks an organic integration between new theatrical vocabularies and existing dramatic traditions. Looking at today's experimental theatre, it still confronts practical difficulties such as disordered spatial-temporal juxtaposition, suspended stage design forms detached from substance, fragmented narratives lacking a coherent core, and inadequate adaptation in actor-audience interaction

(Zhao, 2026). Compared with the radical approach of replacing old norms with novel forms, a more prudent and effective path may lie in how to accommodate new expressive means within the overall dramatic structure, rather than letting them supplant tradition itself.

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