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THE CHARACTERISTICS OF LUO HUAI-ZHEN'S RECREATE HISTORICAL DRAMA - "BAN ZHAO"

LIN, I-CHIN
NATIONAL CHUNG KUNG UNIVERSITY
TAIWAN R.O.C.

Ms. I-Chin Lin
National Chung Kung University
Taiwan R.O.C.

The Characteristic of Luo Huai-zhen's Recreating Historical Drama- "Ban Zhao"

Synopsis:

- 1.The characteristic of Luo Huai-zhen's play in recreating traditional Chinese historical drama
- 2.How Luo Huai-zhen recreate the three primary roles in the play Ban Zhao
- 3.Luo Huai-zhen's creative purpose and characteristics in Ban Zhao

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Lin I-Chin

National Chung Kung University, Taiwan ROC

ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the Chinese playwright- Luo Huai-Zhen's recreating historical drama "Ban Zhao". In "Ban Zhao", Luo recreates the characteristics of three primary roles Ban Zhao, Tsao Shou and Ma Hsu, and focuses on portraying Ban Zhao's lonely female scholar figure, Tsao Shou's obstinacy in knowledge, and the figure of Ma Hsu pursuing social position and wealth. These recreating personalities do not limit to specific person, time or space, but represent the universal human beings. Luo not only strengthens the depiction of the emotion of the individuals, but also rethinks of the meaning of the "ideal" and criticizes the phenomena in the modern society. Hence, the study analyzes the characteristics of Ban Zhao, Tsao Shou and Ma Hsu with who Luo recreates and illustrates the meaning of these recreations. In addition, in comparison with Luo's other works, Luo also explores his creative thoughts. The result not only shows Luo Huai-Zhen's theatrical features, but also interprets the characteristics of Chinese recreating historical drama development in the twentieth century.

INTRODUCTION

Luo Huai-Zhen (1956--) is a Chinese contemporary playwright known for unique characteristic in creating. He tends to show his unique explanation and understanding in history and recreates Chinese traditional historical dramas. Such works he recreated are full of speculative and realistic factors that his works also show strong differences between the general Chinese classical dramas and other playwrights' plays. In Luo's

work “Ban Zhao” (Kunqu Opera, 1997), people can recognize those significant features and characteristics.

Luo Huai-Zhen was invited by the main actress Chang Ching-Hsien in Shanghai Kunqu Opera Troupe. “Ban Zhao”, based on the performing characteristics of Chang Ching-Hsien and Shanghai Kunqu Opera Troupe, was finished in 1997 and premiered in 2001. Previous study mentioned the differences between the drama plots and real situations or described the characteristics of characters. Therefore, the aim of this present study is to provide an interpretation for the meaning and the purpose of recreating characters, and to explore Luo Huai-Zhen’s crucial thoughts.

Furthermore, from the beginning of the twentieth century, “recreating the Chinese traditional historical dramas” has become vital and magnificent in the development of the Chinese traditional theatres. Such recreating works not only show the values of modern people, but also bring the possibility of re-interpreting the history. Accordingly, this study also analyzes other plays which have similar plots as those in Luo’s creation, and explores the purpose of his creation. It allows us not only to realize the Luo Huai-Zhen’s creating features, but also to recognize the development of Chinese traditional theaters in the twentieth century.



The posture of “Ban Zhao”,

Resource: http://quyi.chinese.cn/article/2010-04/20/content_126595.htm

The CHANGES OF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND IN “BAN ZHAO”

It is obvious that there is a significant difference between history and performances. According to the *Poetic* written by Aristotle who mentioned the differences between history and dramas, history records the things which have happened; while dramas describe the things which may happen. Dramas tend to perform the possible situations under the historical structure. History records specific situations. (Aristotle & translated by Chen, Ching-Mei (2001).*Poetic*. Taipei: The Commercial Press, p81) .The historical dramas are primarily based on the history. Although they tell the incidents of the past, they do not merely record the specific situations. The historical dramas tell about what have happened in the past and find their universal regular instead of rigidly adhering to the truth of specific incidents. Therefore, in “Ban Zhao”, Luo uses historical imagination to recreate the life of characters under the factual historical situations.

The changing of Ban Zhao

In the drama *Ban Zhao*, there are three points of the character of Ban Zhao which differ from the realistic Ban Zhao in history. First of all, Luo contributes the compiling of the *Hanshu* to the ban removed for Ban Zhao. However, in real history, because Ban Gu's brother- Ban Zhao had great contribution in military, the king of Han dynasty removed the ban. Secondly, when it comes to Ban Zhao's marriage, her father wished Tsao Shou could help her finish the mission of compiling the *Hanshu*, so that Ban Gu asked Tsao Shou to marry Ban Zhao. In reality, Ban Gu died as Ban Zhao was 10 years old, so it was impossible that Ban Gu made the decision of Ban Zhao's marriage. Thirdly, Luo writes that Ban Zhao was reluctant to live in the palace. However, Ban Zhao had great relationship with royal family and obtained some rights in real world. In order to express Luo's creating ideal, the changes of some characteristics of Ban Zhao have been made in his work.

The changing of Ma Hsu and Tsao Shou

Moreover, there are also several differences in the characters of Ma Hsu and

Tsao Shou based on the historical recordings and dramas. Speaking of the character of Ma Hsu, Luo depicts that he was older than Ban Zhao; however, in reality, Ma Hsu was younger than Ban Zhao. Another changed point is that in order to accompany Ban Zhao to live in the palace, Ma Hsu became the eunuch voluntarily; however, in real world Ma Hsu was a person with intact body. In addition, when it comes to the character of Tsao Shou, Luo recreates that he was the handsome and charming playboy, indulging in fame and wealth and committed suicide at the end. But in the historical recording, he was recorded as a person with knowledge and conscientiousness but died of natural cause at an early age. Through recreating the characters of Ban Zhao, Ma Hsu and Tsao Shou, Luo not only fills the vacant parts of history, but tries to focus on their helpless humanity behind the positive behavior.

THE REWRITING OF CHARACTERS IN “BAN ZHAO”

In the work of recreating Chinese traditional historical dramas, compared with the static characters in Chinese traditional classic dramas, the characters in new recreating plays have become multiple and complicated. In the *Chinese Contemporary Operas*, Wang An-Chi describes that following the concept of loyalty and filial piety, Chinese traditional dramas' characters are often either all good or all bad. However, in Chinese contemporary recreating dramas, characters' personalities are not so single as usual. The playwrights try to concentrate on their black-and-white characteristic, or explore characters' deeply desires hidden behind the positive behavior. Hence, the playwrights of Chinese contemporary recreating dramas strongly explore the humanities of complicated and unclear faint sides. (Wang, A.C. (2002). *Chinese Contemporary Operas*. Taipei: San Min.p102). In the script of *Ban Zhao*, Luo Huai-Zhen recreates the figures of Ban Zhao, Tsao Shou and Ma Cao, and focuses on their universal humanities and Luo's concerns in modern society.

The character of Ban Zhao

First of all, Luo uses historical imagination to describe the whole life of Ban Zhao from age 14 to 71. Luo depicts that Ban Zhao had strong passion to accept the

mission of compiling the Hanshu in the palace when she was young. When growing up, she little by little encountered the dilemma whether she should keep finishing her mission in loneliness or engage in social activities. Luo portrays Ban Zhao with the life that she did not merely follow her mission without question. As a living human being, she hesitated to make a decision between the duty of a scholar and her willing life. Since she paid full attention to the mission of compiling the Hanshu, the ideal mission made her give up her whole life and be lonely and helpless in the palace.

In the final plots, Luo arranges that the stage was empty, those enormous books were moved away by the book child. In this arrangement, if “books” represent the ideal contribution of Ban Zhao, “the empty space” symbolizes the illusory consequence in Ban Zhao’s real life. As Luo Huai-Zhen in “The Creative Literature Book” said that even though Ban Zhao owned the fortune and fame, she was always lonely and painful in her intrinsic world. Taking a broad view of Ban Zhao’s life, she contributed her whole emotion and spirit to significant book Hanshu. (Luo, H.Z.(2001). “The Creative Literature Book,” Shanghai Theatre, 2001(06), p15) Luo intensely distinguished the different figure of Ban Zhao in historical records. He focused on the lonely process of compiling the Hanshu and Ban Zhao’s personal feeling. These plots not only show Ban Zhao’s life, but happen to every individual person. Therefore, through recreating Ban Zhao, Luo wants to fill in the empty part of historical records, he also shows his concerns to humanities who have the similar situations as Ban Zhao.



The character -Ban Zhao

Resource: http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_6afcd97901017k44.html

The characters of Ma Hsu and Tsao Shou

Luo Huai-Zhen also recreates two characters- Ma Hsu and Tsao Shou, as two types of Chinese traditional scholars. Ma Hsu presents the personality of Chinese scholar who keeps working hard in study and is willing to poverty. He seeks the contribution of doing the academic works in his whole life. Relatively, Tsao Shou seeks fame and wealth. He is interested in several social activities. Ma Hsu and Tsao Shou represent the two types of Chinese traditional intellectuals. The former cares about immortal academic contributions; the latter pursues the social fame and prestige. Interestingly, although the goals of Ma Hsu and Tsao Shou are different, they utilize the similar methods to achieve their dreams- which are “literal articles”. Ma Hsu takes advantages of compiling the Hanshu to achieve his ideal, while Tsao Shou creates beautiful poetic writings to obtain his status.

In addition, Luo arranges two specific characters, one is Ban Zhao’s brother Ban-Gu, another is the eunuch Fong-Lun. These two characters who are similar to Ma Hsu and Tsao Shou represent the two types of Chinese traditional intellectuals. Speaking of Ban-Gu, he not only wanted to compile the Hanshu, but was eager to finish “Chinese philosophical Astronomy” part in Hanshu. Tsao Shou was willing to attain his unfinished goal. Relatively, Fong-Lun encouraged Tsao Shou to obtain fame by writing eulogistic article to the elder queen. Ban-Gu and Fong-Lun acted as the “stimulated” roles to Ma Hsu and Tsao Shou and brought them to achieve their ideal goals. Nevertheless, no matter what Ma Hsu and Tsao Shou selected, both of them did not have the satisfactory ending. Ma Hsu died immediately after leaving the palace. Tsao Shou committed suicide by making a hole in the water. At the end of the performance, both Ma Hsu and Tsao Shou failed to achieve their ideal goals. Luo enhances Ma Hsu and Tsao Shou’s lonely and helpless feeling that historical records did not mention.

Through recreating Ban Zhao, Ma Hsu and Tsao Shou, Luo wants to explore their personalities of complicated and unclear faint sides rather than flat ones. In the ancient period and environment, Ban Zhao, Ma Hsu and Tsao Shou as normal people were also helpless, just like the modern human beings. Those characters have become the universal figures. Luo wishes to explore their humanities to rethink of the feeling

and value of individuals in ancient period and in modern society.



The characters- Ban Zhao(left) and Ma Hsu (right)

Resource: <http://www.shobserver.com/news/detail?id=24085>)



The characters -Tsao Shou (right) and Ban Zhao(middle)

Resource: http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_6afcd97901017k44.html

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF LUO HUAI-ZHEN'S THOUGHTS

Playwrights have made the substantial breakthrough in Chinese traditional dramas in the 1980 period. They restart to directly focus on the meaning of “Human nature”, which includes schizophrenia, multiple personality, and subconscious mind. In Luo’s works, he is also concerned for the value of women, which has been ignored for a long time.

Furthermore, in “Reconstruction of Chinese Traditional Dramas”, Luo Huai-Zhen said that if 1980 was the period of deconstruction, 1990 became the period of reconstruction. In Chinese traditional recreating dramas, in the period of 1980,

performances were created as unusual as human beings. While in the period of 1990, the dramas were created as similar to ourselves as possible. This “reconstruction” means to return to original classical tradition, and to the true presence of human nature. (Luo, H.Z. (2004). “Reconstruction of Chinese Traditional Dramas,” Chinese Theatre, 2004(02), p5) “Returning to the classical tradition” means the recreation of Chinese traditional historical dramas, and “reconstruction” expresses that people make use of modern value to explore the possible discovery and meaning of Chinese tradition. Therefore, for Luo Huai-Zhen, “small history” and “the meaning of pursuing the significant ideal” are the points that he wants to explore in Chinese classical tradition.

Focusing on “Small History”

First of all, Lou Huai-Zhen focuses on the depiction of “small history”. He mentions that the so-called “small history” creations correspond to the creation of “great history”. This “small” history is regarded as “ting” situations which are easily overlooked in the magnificent field of view. This ting history includes individual, local, trivial, or even the private life or human nature. Even if “small history” is insignificant, it provides with invisible resources for big history. Both small history and big history constitute Chinese true mental and spiritual history. (Luo, H.Z. (2009). “My Views of Chinese Traditional historical Dramas Creations in New Period,” Chinese Theatre, 2009(04), p5) So-called the “big history” often records the history of elites classes such as emperors, aristocracy and intellectuals. Also, in the patriarchal society, history is almost regarded as male history, women become subordinate and easily ignored. Hence, by describing the “small history”, Lou hopes to excavate micro-history and focuses on female contribution.

Lou Huai-Zhen utilizes historical imagination to illuminate the unclear or unrecorded sides of female historical people and shows mercy to their misfortune. In “Ban Zhao”, Lou recreates the Ban Zhao’s compiling *Hanshu* arduous process, admiring Ban Zhao’s contributions and sacrifice. He believes that her spirit is as praiseworthy as male scholars, and sees Ban Zhao as academic and individual paradigm. Moreover, in Lou’s other works, he also cares about vulnerable groups of

women in history. For example, in the script of “Xi-Shi Returning to Yue”, Lou arranges Xi-Shi who was passively a spy was pregnant with enemy king’s child. Even though Xi-Shi finished her mission successfully, she was despised by her country’s king, soldiers, and even her lover Fan-Li. In the work of “Pawn Wife”, although the mother fulfilled her selfish husband and child’s wishes, she obtained the tragedy that her husband and child both died at the end. Lou focuses on the “small history” which is not written in official records, and makes women be seen again in history.

In addition, in Lou’s plays, the figures of male characters are no longer holy heroes but the normal people with human nature such as the avaricious Xu Xian (“White Snake and Xu Xian”), the ruthless Golden Dragon (“Golden Dragon and Ephemera”), the ungrateful Fan-Li and Yue king with suspicious personality (“Xi Shi Returning to Yue”). Lou hopes to deconstruct male-oriented history, and tries to stand on female side to figure out the image of men in female perspectives. Therefore, Lou’s scripts are full of deep concerns for women, and he focuses on the female contributions in history.

Speculating the Meaning of Ideal

The “small history” creations do not merely focus on the female figures, but pay more attention to the “human nature”. The speculation of human nature characteristic not only exists in Lou Huai-Zhen’s works, but also becomes the general features after 1980 period. Even if “recreating the historical dramas” is the common in Chinese traditional performances, there are remarkable differences between the dramas in the 1960 period and those in the 1980 period. In the 1960 period, although the characters encountered torturous predicaments such as being betrayed and misunderstood, the characters maintained their positive attitude and fulfilled their goals. The endings were harmonious and satisfactory. However, after the 1980 period, as characters encountered several obstacles, their personalities started to be modified. Characters’ minds are no longer black-and-white, but become unclear and complicated. The 1960’s and 1980’s creations both had involved plots, although the characters’ characteristics in 1980’s creations changed. How to create the “complicated and faint sides” personalities shows the creative characteristic of

playwrights in the new period.

The History of Chinese Contemporary Operas demonstrates that in 1980-1990 periods, playwrights had another look at historical personages and situations, and excavated the precious experiences which are helpful to modern society. Also, the works in this period are able to show playwrights' significant creative characteristics. Lou Huai-Zhen is one of the typical playwright in this period. (Yu, T. & Wang, A.K. (2005). *The History of Chinese Contemporary Operas*. Beijing: Xueyuan Press, p642-643.) In "Ban Zhao", if the great ideal is "finishing the *Hanshu*", the ideal brings nothing but countless misfortune and sacrifice to Ban Zhao. In Lou's other drama "Golden Dragon and Ephemera", after several misunderstanding and conflict, even if Golden Dragon and Ephemera's misunderstanding is resolved, their conflict and real identities bring strong deadlock. Eventually, the character Ephemera comes to the throne with perplexed expression. The "perplexed" represents the changing ideal. In "Xi Shi Returning to Yue", Xi Shi who was a spy sacrificed herself for the country and was abandoned by the country. Lou takes advantage of the characters to question the meaning of "ideal" in big period and society. According to Lou Huai-Zhen's serious creations, people can not only realize the Luo's speculative and realistic features, but also recognize the characteristics of Chinese traditional theaters development after 1980 period.

CONCLUSION

Recreating Historical Dramas not only reflects the values of modern people, but also provides playwrights with more opportunities to recreate and explain the possibilities of history. Luo Huai-Zhen is renowned for showing his unique understanding and explanation in dramas, and makes his works full of speculative and realistic factors. People can see such creating characteristics in the play "Ban Zhao".

Taking advantage of Historical Imagination

First, Luo Huai-Zhen changed the structure of history intensely. Luo took advantages of the historical imagination and changed the process of how Ban Zhao

compiled the *Hanshu*. In the play of “Ban Zhao”, there are two parts which differ from the original history. First of all, Luo contributed the compiling of the *Hanshu* to the ban removed for Ban Zhao.

Secondly, Luo changed Ban Zhao’s active and friendly relations with the royal family to passive connection. In addition, Luo illustrated that Tsao Shou was obsessed with fame and fortune, and finally committed suicide by making a hole in the water. This imagination differs from the records of *New Translation of Post-Hanshu*. When it comes to the character of Ma Hsu, Luo not only increased his age but also created that Ma Hsu became a eunuch of his own will because he wanted to stay with Ban Zhao in the palace. Luo intensely modified the original history, and made the main characters more multiple and complicated rather than single and flat.

Caring about Social Environment through Recreating Historical characters

Furthermore, through the character of Ban Zhao, Luo Huai-Zhen focuses on presence of humanities rather than magnificent ideal and recognizes the remarkable contribution of women in history. Hence, Luo strengthens that Ban Zhao lived not only as a talented woman in Han Dynasty, but also a lonely and helpless female in ancient period.

In addition, Luo intends to describe Ma Hsu and Tsao Shou as two different models of Chinese scholars. The former cares about academic values; the latter pursues the social status. However, no matter how hard Ma Hsu and Tsao Shou pursued their ideal dreams, the illusory dreams made them failed and lost their lives. Through recreating the three main characters, Ban Zhao, Tsao Shou and Ma Hsu are not limited in specific period of Han Dynasty, their figures are able to represent normal humanities in modern society. Luo hopes to take care of the ting and helpless human beings living in the big environment. In addition, he strengthens depiction of the emotion of the individuals, and re-thinks of the meaning of the "ideal", and then criticizes the phenomena of the modern society.

Speculating the Meaning between Individuals and Ideal

Eventually, in the aspect of Luo Huai-Zhen’s creating thoughts, he tends to

focus on underprivileged minority rather than magnificent heroes and nobles, which makes a significant difference from Chinese traditional classic playwrights. Moreover, instead of weakening the image of men, Luo tries to stand on female side to realize the women's perspectives rather than men's. The male characters in Chinese traditional classic dramas are usually created as heroes and full of patriarchal characteristics; relatively, the male characters in Luo's works have become more human-based and normal.

Furthermore, in the "new period" of Chinese traditional dramas, the views of people including directors, playwrights and audience start to change. Before the period of 1960, Chinese traditional dramas usually had a happy ending; however, in the "new period", people believe that "happy ending" is not essential in the end of plays. Therefore, Luo Huai-Zhen's works not just show his own thoughts, but represent the thoughts of modern people. Is it possible that the precious and distinctive human personalities may be sacrificed easily as they follow the ideal and standard roles? Luo Huai-Zhen's recreating historical dramas usually are full of strong speculative and realistic characteristics. He also tries to put his unique thoughts in his plays and make audience think of the answers behind the dramas.

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