

**MODERNIST VISIONS BEYOND THE HORIZON OF HISTORY: THE
THEATRICALITY OF BAI WEI'S RARELY STAGED PLAYS**

by

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Modernist visions beyond the horizon of history: the theatricality of Bai Wei's rarely staged plays

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Abstract

Bai Wei 白薇 (1894-1987) is one of the most prolific women playwrights in early 20th-century China. From 1925 to 1934, she published fifteen plays that expressed concerns for common people's (especially women's) living conditions, reflected on the drawbacks of the national revolutions, and, later, championed leftist ideals, many of which garnered huge popularity and were frequently reprinted. Despite their considerable quantity and popularity, these plays were rarely staged. Due to the lack of staging opportunities, their unconventional modernist style, and the paucity of production records, these scripts have been largely deemed unproducibile and low in theatricality by theatre scholars and critics both now and then.

In this thesis, I aim to challenge the arbitrary correlation between Bai's small number of staging records, unconventional style, and the assumed lack of theatricality. Through a detailed production analysis of four aspects of Bai's plays (acting, casting, set design, and stage effects) based on historical records found in Bai's original works, Republican China newspapers and journals, as well as biographical and autobiographical accounts of Bai's life, I argue that Bai's rarely staged neo-romantic scripts are embedded with rich theatrical intentions and implications. They represent a cutting-edge vision of modernist theatre that could not be accommodated by the social and material conditions in Republican China. Furthermore, in her later realistic plays, Bai, instead of completely discarding the early style, hones the rich theatricality in her neo-romantic plays into an integral part of her realistic theatre that allows her to fully engage the general public fully without compromising her feminist politics, her impulse for subjective representation, or artistic visions for a holistic theatre. I thus challenge the stereotypical conceptualization of the early 20th-century Chinese

spoken drama history as wholly dominated by social realism and an androcentric nationalist ideology. Further, I seek to interrupt a critical tradition that disavows the theatricality inherent in Bai Wei's plays, a tradition that continues to marginalize her work and keep it from production.

Lay Summary

This research explores the theatricality of the works of Bai Wei 白薇 (1894-1987), one of the most prolific women playwrights in early 20s century China whose works were rarely staged despite their considerable quantity and popularity. By analyzing Bai's existing published scripts in the context of historical records from Republican China newspapers and journals and (auto)biographical accounts, I discern rich theatrical potentials in the implications of acting, casting, set design, and stage effects (lighting and sound) in Bai's early neo-romantic plays, and clarify how these techniques are maintained in her later realistic plays to enrich the theatre experience. I thus argue that the correlation between the number of staging records and the plays' intrinsic theatrical value is completely arbitrary, and that Bai's rarely staged scripts envision a modernist theatre with rich theatricality ahead of her time.

Preface

This thesis is an original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Zhixuan Zhu.

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*To all the amazing women who came before me;
Who Journey alongside me and inspire me every day;
And our hope of a brighter future.*

1. Introduction

The early 20th-century witnessed the flourishing of the modern *huaju* (spoken drama) form in theatre and dramatic literature in China. After China suffered military defeats by Western powers and Japan in the late 19th century, Chinese intellectuals sought to rejuvenate the society by rejecting traditions and constructing a modern national identity through cultural reforms, of which theatre is an integral part. Modeling after Japanese *shingeki* (new drama) and borrowing from Western theatrical styles such as aestheticism, symbolism, and realism, Chinese intellectuals produced pioneering spoken drama scripts and theatre productions in an attempt to reach the public with their revolutionary ideals. Theatre thus became a powerful call to arms that challenged the longstanding feudal morality and pushed for a democratic new nation. Among these pioneer dramatists, male playwrights such as Hong Shen 洪深 (1894-1955), Tian Han 田汉 (1898-1968), and Cao Yu 曹禺 (1910-1996) most frequently saw their works produced while their female counterparts such as Bai Wei 白薇 (1894-1987), though equally prolific and popular among readers at the time, seldom had the chance. Bai's works were widely circulated in print: her *Linli* 琳丽 (Miss Linglee¹), for instance, was regarded as “one of the ten major works published between 1911 and 1926, and it was one of the twenty-two most reprinted plays during the early period of modern Chinese spoken drama creation” (Keung 2020, 174). In stark contrast with this publication success and reach, there is little record of her work being staged then and since.

¹ The English translation for *Linli* 琳丽 is “Miss Linglee” rather than “Miss Linli” because this was the English title printed in the book published in 1925 by Shangwu yinshuguan 商务印书馆 (The Commercial Press). The translation of the name of the leading character will remain “Linli.”

Consequently, her plays have long been deemed unproducibile, low in theatricality², and thus immature in style and insignificant to Chinese theatre history.

Tethering critical estimation and theatrical value to the staging record rather than the evident publication popularity, many critics and scholars have understood productions and documentation as evidence of her plays' the lack of theatricality, artistry, and historic value. However, a closer look at the life and works of Bai Wei reveals that, far from lacking theatricality, her scripts are filled with vibrantly theatrical staging implications. Drawing upon three sources (Western modernist impulses such as aestheticism and expressionism, spoken drama practice in Japan, and the cultural and political dynamics in China), Bai constructed an unconventional modernist style with distinctive expressionistic features, most of which ran against the grains of the social and material reality in Republican China (1912-1949). By discerning indications of casting, acting, set design, and stage effects in a detailed production analysis, this thesis argues that with its rich theatrical potentials, Bai's dramatic style is a legitimate experiment of modernism ahead of its time that balances an artistic impulse for subjective representation and theatre's activist function of public engagement.

² As Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlewait warn in their book *Theatricality* (2013), the expansive and oftentimes ambiguous definition of "theatricality" should not be taken for granted. In this thesis, what Bai's critics mean by her "lack of theatricality" is that her plays are only fit for reading but intrinsically inadequate in capturing the audience in a real performance because of their highly poetic style, excessive emotionality, and convoluted plot, a judgement heavily influenced by their androcentric preference for social realism over Bai's unconventional modernism. In my usage of the term, I target Bai's past critiques and argue that her modernist style presents her consideration for staging techniques and production potentials beyond mere readership. They could have captured the audience in a real performance in the historical context of Republican China with proper technical and material support.

1.1 Overview of Bai's Life and Works

Bai Wei (1894-1987), originally named Huang Zhang 黄彰, was born in Zixing, Hunan Province. As a young adult, Bai was forced into an arranged marriage and, after suffering domestic violence, ran away to attend boarding schools. When her family pursued relentlessly to force her back into marriage, Bai escaped alone to Japan in 1918, where she struggled in poverty and hard labor and received an education in biology at the Ochanomizu University in Tokyo. It was during her stay in Japan that she met Tian Han, who inspired her to dive into dramatic literature as a tool of “dissecting the society into pieces” (Zeng 1985, 5) and “declaring war” (9) on the pain and misery in life³. Bai returned to China in 1926 to support the Northern Expedition, a military campaign launched by the Kuomintang (KMT) against the northern Beiyang government and local warlords in an attempt to unify China and consolidate the democratic vision of the Xinhai Revolution (1911). Disillusioned when the KMT-led revolution became corrupted, Bai joined the Left-wing Dramatists League in 1930, an association promoting socialist realism and supporting the Communist Revolution under the persecution of the KMT government.

Bai is one of the most prolific women playwrights in early 20th century China. From the 1920s to the 1940s, she created literary and dramatic works that expressed concerns for common people's (especially women's) living conditions, reflected on the drawbacks of the KMT national revolutions, and later, championed leftist ideals and anti-Japanese invasion sentiments. She published fifteen plays from 1925 to 1934, many of which garnered huge popularity and were frequently reprinted. Drawing upon autobiographical and biographical works and contemporaneous periodicals in Republican China, I compiled a list of Bai's

³ All of the translations of non-English sources are by the author.

existing published plays in chronological order, among which four have records of having been staged: *Sufei* 苏菲 (Sophie, written and performed in 1922), *Qiangweijiu* 蔷薇酒 (Rose Wine, written in 1925 and performed twice before 1940), *Dachu Youlingta* 打出幽灵塔 (Breaking Out of the Ghost Pagoda, rewritten in 1928 and performed by students), and *Yiniang* 姨娘 (Aunt, written in 1929 and performed in 1933 and 1936):

1. *Sufei* 苏斐 (Sophia), written in 1922 and published in 1926. It was staged in Tokyo, Japan around 1922 by Chinese students in two performances for a fund-raising event with Bai Wei in the leading role (Bai and He 1983, 64).

2. *Linli* 琳丽 (Miss Linglee), written and published in 1925. No performance records are available.

3. *Qiangweijiu* 蔷薇酒 (Rose wine), written in 1925 and published in 1929. It was performed sometime before 1936 by students in a school fair in Suzhou, China (Zigang 1936, 31). Based on a photo of student performers in Wuben Women's School, Shanghai, China, the play was also possibly staged in 1930:



Figure 1 “Wuben nǚxiao nianjiuzhou jinian youyihui zhong biaoyan huaju (Qiangwei jiu) zhi quanti yanyuan” 務本女校廿九周紀念游藝會中表演話劇（薔薇酒）之全體演員（All Performers in the Wuben Women’s School Production of Rose Wine at the School’s Nineteenth Anniversary Celebration Fair). (Lu 1)

Apart from the small lines in the left corner identifying the play as “Rose Wine,” I believe it to be a record of Bai’s *Rose Wine* also because it was performed in 1930, after the publication of Bai’s script. Among the five female students in realistic costumes, one is dressed in a Western-style man’s suit, one in Western-style dress, and the other three in Chinese cheongsam, which could reasonably correspond to the leading male character Wuan Bai (21 years old, the handsome son of a warlord), his sister Wuan Hua (a girl who returns

from education abroad), and the other three female characters who are either rich ladies or beautiful dance girl.

4. *Fangwen* 访雯 (Visiting Qingwen), written and published in 1926. No performance records are available.

5. *Gemingshen de shounan* 革命神的受难 (Suffering of the Revolution God), written in 1927 and published in 1928. No performance records are available.

6. *Dachu Youlingta* 打出幽灵塔 (Breaking Out of the Ghost Pagoda), finished in 1927, rewritten and published in 1928. It was performed once by students at Harbin No.1 School, China. The performance was such “a great hit” that the students “insisted upon performing even after the Japanese military invasion” regardless of the harsh conditions during the national war (Caoming 1987, 4).

7. *Yiniang* 姨娘 (Aunt), written and published in 1929. It was staged in Harbin, China, in 1933 by Xingxing jutuan 星星剧团 (The Stars Theatrical Group). The show was directed by revolutionary writer Jin Jianxiao 金剑啸 (1910-1936) and the famous writers Shu Qun 舒群 (1913-1989) and Xiao Hong 萧红 (1911-1942) performed the main roles (Qiushi 2011, 108). It was also performed in the Hitotsubashi Assembly Hall in Kanda, Tokyo, Japan, in May 1936 by oversea Chinese students. The performance was in Chinese and continued for three days. In the record, *Aunt* was praised as “the peak of modern Chinese dramas” (“The Chinese student troupe” 1936, 4) alongside Tian Han’s *Hongshui* 洪水 (Flood).

8. *Letu* 乐土 (Paradise), a rewriting of *The Suffering of the Revolution God* published in 1931. No performance records are available.

9. *Jia yangren* 假洋人 (The Fake Foreigner), written and published in 1931. No performance records are available.
10. *Ying* 莺 (Warbler), written and published in 1931. No performance records are available.
11. *Beininglu mouzhan* 北宁路某站 (A Station on Beining Road), written in 1931 and published in 1932. No performance records are available.
12. *Di tongzhi* 敌同志 (Enemy in Comrades), published in 1932. No performance records are available.
13. *Zhanhuo* 战祸 (The Disaster of War), published in 1933. No performance records are available.
14. *Fengzai* 丰灾 (The Disaster of Harvest), written in 1932 and published in 1933. No performance records are available.
15. *Yijiusansi: Yishitongren* 一九三四：一视同仁 (1934: All on Equal Grounds), written in 1933 and published in 1934. No performance records are available.
16. *Ye shen qu* 夜深曲 (A Tune Late at Night), written in 1939 and published in 1930. No performance records are available.

In this list, the first four are Bai's early works written in Japan that predominantly applied a neo-romantic⁴ style to discuss the pain and passion of romantic love. *The Suffering of the Revolution God* and *Breaking Out of the Ghost Pagoda* were written when Bai returned to China during the Northern Expedition and correspondingly explored challenges

⁴ "Neo-romanticism" in Chinese theatre history refers to certain Western modernist theatrical trends, including Oscar Wilde's aestheticism, the symbolism represented by Maurice Maeterlinck, Gerhart Hauptmann and Leonid Nikolayevich Andreyev, and the expressionism presented by August Strindberg and Eugene O'Neill.

faced by the national revolution both in military and familial terms. The rest on the list, especially the ones conceived after Bai joined the Left-wing Dramatists League in 1930, demonstrate a shift from her early neo-romantic style to a much more realistic one to arouse revolutionary sentiments and to support the resistance against the Japanese invasion. Among her works, *Miss Linglee* is the most representative of her early neo-romantic style; *The Suffering of the Revolution God* and *Paradise*, early and late versions of the same story, directly demonstrate her shift from a neo-romantic style to a realistic one; and *Breaking Out of the Ghost Pagoda* is considered to be most representative of Bai's style and contain the highest artistic value by critics such as Yan Haiping and Dai Jinhua (whose works on Bai will be discussed in section 1.3). To control the scope of this research, I will mainly focus on these four works for detailed production analysis while drawing upon specific moments in other plays for comparison when needed.

1.2 Assumption of Low Theatricality and Reasons for Reevaluation

Despite their number, significant uptake by contemporaneous readers, and social influence, Bai's scripts were seldom produced and often criticized for being unstageable or lacking theatricality. In his introduction to the drama section in *Zhongguo xinwenxue daxi* (Compendium of Modern Chinese Literature, 1935), the earliest anthology of modern Chinese literature and a cornerstone of the canonization of modern dramatists such as Hu Shi and Tian Han in Chinese spoken drama history, pioneering dramatist Hong Shen commented: "Bai Wei's *Linli* (Miss Linglee) and Xiang Peiliang's *Annen* (Mr. Annen) are both passionate works that carry a bit of 'hysteria'⁵ – this kind of play cannot be staged unless very talented

⁵ The original phrase used by Hong, "xiesidiliya 歇斯蒂利亚," is a transliteration of the English word "hysteria." Over the course of its translation into Chinese, the word lost its original reference to "spontaneous uterus movement" but is generally used to describe frantic

actors are involved” (Hong 1935, 70). For contemporary critics, “[w]ith contrived plot, hysterical characterization, and convoluted rhetoric, Bai Wei’s style has often been regarded as a failed attempt to grasp the real” (Wang 2004, 98). Both views dismiss the theatrical significance of Bai’s works by focusing on their highly emotional style and convoluted plot that deviates from the realistic theatre that prevailed in Republican China.

Such an evaluation ignores how practical conditions such as technology and political environment can easily reduce the chances of production for dramatic works, which does not diminish their intrinsic theatricality. While Bai’s works, like many other scripts in her time, were either never staged or were said to be failures in real performances, some contemporaneous critics argued that the production of theatre was “hindered by material conditions in terms of stage setting and lighting” (Zhang 1937, 1494). With her emphasis on a holistic experience of modernist theatre aided by cutting-edge stage effects, the lack of production of Bai’s plays could rather have resulted from technical drawbacks instead of low theatricality. Additionally, Bai’s works faced strict censorship by the government and the public because of her sharp criticism of the KMT-led national revolution and the patriarchal society. For instance, when *Breaking Out of the Ghost Pagoda* was published in *Yusi*, the journal received warnings from the government regarding the “inappropriate” content of Bai’s script. Bai herself was highly aware of the force of public censorship: “I depict those who betray their country (China) to be extremely villainous but their wives are good people.

They have a conscience. Such a script probably will not be published even when I finish it,

behaviors caused by fierce emotions. In this thesis, all the “hysteria” and “hysterical” in quotation marks and in the translation of Chinese sources refer to this meaning, which reflects the critics’ evaluation of Bai’s style instead of mine. It should be noted that this word retains a gendered connotation in Chinese and is oftentimes used on women/women’s works in a derogatory sense. Therefore, the fact that the critiques against Bai adopt such gendered language and an emphasis on emotionality as being outside acceptable staging norms indicates their androcentric framing.

nor will it likely have a chance to be performed in big cities like Shanghai, Nanjing, Beijing, or Tianjin” (Bai and He 1983, 142). All such practical conditions could have made it hard for Bai’s plays to be staged. Thus it is clear that the arbitrary correlation between Bai’s lack of production and lack of theatricality requires a reevaluation.

Further important prompts to reassess the place of theatricality in Bai’s work can be found in the detailed stage directions and other theatrical impulses evident in the plays themselves. Bai gives stage directions that pay close attention to the temporal, spatial, and embodied nature of stage performance and the technical aspects of theatre in her plays. She often incorporates stage directions to leave the stage dark, empty, or silent for several minutes/for a while. See, for example, the beginning of act 3, scene 2 in *Ghost Pagoda*: “The stage is dark for five minutes, indicating that four hours have passed” (Zeng 1985, 313); or near the ending in *Revolution God*: “The stage is pitch-dark for a while and silence reigns as if nothing exists anymore, until red flames stir and a sad song is heard from the darkness” (Bai 1928a, 41). Moreover, the plays contain detailed descriptions of the actors’ movements, such as how they make physical contact and from which direction they enter and exit the stage. For instance, in *Paradise*, the Old Man “enters through the woods on stage left, bearing a hoe and singing while he walks with his daughter following behind” (Zeng 1985, 341). As will be demonstrated in section 2.2, Bai’s plays often feature violent physical interaction between men and women such as pulling, dragging, and forceful kissing, which Bai describes with detailed stage directions. Bai clearly incorporated specific, detailed staging possibilities or at least had certain theatrical visions in mind.

Historical records provide the most powerful evidence against the accusation of Bai’s unproducibility. Contrary to the common belief that Bai’s plays were unstageable, there are

staging records and reviews indicating the popularity of Bai's scripts in amateur school productions. As is shown in the list above, most of the productions were by students, especially those in women's schools, among whom Bai's scripts were reportedly very popular: "Female students at the time seemed to be very fond of it [Bai's *Rose Wine*] and it was staged by my home school during a fair" (Zigang 1936, 31). Not only were plays in realistic style such as *Aunt* performed, but neo-romantic pieces like *Sophie* and *Rose Wine* were also popular choices. And *Breaking Out of the Ghost Pagoda*, a highly expressionist piece, was also repeatedly staged by student groups who often lacked technical support and material resources; it was reportedly "suitable for grassroots theatre productions and has received good audience response" (Bai and He 1983, 90). The amateur groups' passion for and success in producing Bai's plays despite material limitations demonstrate that Bai's scripts have their theatrical appeals and could be molded and adapted to the challenging practical conditions for amateur productions in Republican China. Reevaluating the theatrical potentials in Bai's published plays before 1937 helps to unsettle the longstanding and false critical correlation drawn between their lack of production and a supposed lack of production value.

1.3 Literature Review

Taking the criticism of Bai's low theatricality and the scarce staging records for granted, current research on Bai tends to analyze her dramatic texts through a literary criticism perspective without considering the specifics of the dramatic genre and its theatrical implications or to evaluate the assumed low theatricality as a mark of her immature writing skill. Consequently, Bai's works are generally labeled as overly emotional and nontheatrical. These assessments have contributed to their fading out of contemporary Chinese theatre

scholarship. Existing research on Bai's dramatic texts can be divided into three categories: those that focus on their literary value without considering the dramatic genre; those that view them as dramatic texts but merely discuss the themes, plots, or rhetorical devices without any attention to their theatrical potentiality; and the rare ones that do consider their theatrical possibility and position in Chinese theatre history. This section will examine representative works from each category to locate the research gap in the current scholarship on Bai's dramas.

The first type of research evaluates Bai's works through the lens of feminist writing, tracing her feminist themes in an overview of her works without distinguishing between dramatic texts and other literary genres. Among these, *Fuchu lishi dibiao: Xiandai funü wenxue yanjiu* 浮出历史地表: 现代妇女文学研究 (Emerging from the Horizon of History: A Study on Modern Chinese Women's Literature, 2018) by Meng Yue and Dai Jinhua and *Chinese Women Writers and the Feminist Imagination, 1905-1948* (2006) by Yan Haiping are valuable in discerning the representation of female identity in Bai's scripts in relation to the historical and social background of Republican China. There is a thorough discussion in *Emerging from the Horizon of History* on how Bai's *Breaking Out of the Ghost Pagoda* presents the rebellious women in "an age of patricide" (43). In Yan's book, chapter four "Other Life" shows how Bai's *Rose Wine* and *Breaking Out of the Ghost Pagoda* truthfully depict women's lives during the revolutionary times, touching on topics such as the patriarchal oppression of familial ethics and women's access to social and political resources. Nevertheless, both works only present a literary and cultural studies angle without addressing how the dramatic form, in particular, contributes to Bai's artistic achievement or historical significance compared with other literary forms such as novels.

The second type distinguishes between dramatic texts and other literary genres in so far as it pays attention to the dramatic structures and rhetorical devices or how Bai is influenced by dramatic trends of the Chinese neo-romanticism and leftist drama movements. For instance, both Su Qiong's *Kuayujing zhong de nüxing xiju* 跨语境中的女性戏剧 (Female Drama Across Different Contexts, 2016) and Chen Fang's "Zhongguo zaoqi nüzuojia xiju chuanguo lun" 中国早期女作家戏剧创作论 (A Study on the Early Chinese Women Writers' Playwriting, 1993) classify Bai as a feminist playwright with an expressionistic style whose works show a distinctive anti-patriarchal tendency. Su analyzes the plays through their dramatic structures and artistic devices, arguing for a place in dramatic literature for a female voice, while Chen focuses on the dramatic form and outlines the common features of women playwrights' dramatic style. Chen Baichen and Dong Jian's *Zhongguo xiandai xiju shigao* 中国现代戏剧史稿 (History of Modern Chinese Drama, 1989) is also a significant source in that it comments on how Bai's playwriting is influenced by other prominent playwrights such as Tian Han and by western dramatic styles such as symbolism and expressionism. The historical perspective helps to situate Bai in the specific cultural context and analyze her plays in relation to other left-wing playwrights and theatrical trends in other cultures. Though emphasizing the dramatic specifics, however, this type of research still views Bai's works as dramas only meant for reading that could be discussed in historical or literary senses but not with explicit relation to stage production.

The third and rarest type truly touches upon the historical evidence and significance of the theatrical and production aspects of Bai's scripts. Wang Yao's *Zhongguo xinwenxue shigao* 中国新文学史稿 (The History of Modern Chinese Literature, 1954) includes a discussion of Bai's later realistic leftist plays as well as a few comments on their reception by

the audience, indicating that her anti-Japanese invasion plays staged by leftist groups were popular among workers (248). Yan discusses in *Chinese Women Writers and the Feminist Imagination* the significance of the staging Bai's plays in the Republican era, saying that "theater staging came to Bai Wei as the enabling hand of a public friend" (122) without providing evidence regarding which plays were actually staged or commenting on the reception of the plays based on historical evidence. The most prominent research in this category is Hui Man Keung's pioneering doctoral dissertation titled "The Private Stage: A Study on Chinese Printed Drama by Bai Wei and Yuan Changying, 1922-1936" (2019). Keung looks at Chinese women playwrights during the Republican era from a printing history perspective and explores the historical backdrop against which the publication-led drama production system facilitated the circulation of modern Chinese dramas without theatrical production. Through the case studies of Bai Wei and Yuan Changying (1894-1973), she argues that the rarely staged dramatic works of women playwrights were intended for a restricted readership, conveying complex concepts and emotions beyond the capacity of performance conventions. In Bai Wei's section, Keung draws upon newly discovered primary sources such as production records of Bai's plays from old newspapers and Bai's unpublished manuscripts in the Zixing City Library's Bai Wei Archive and *Bai Wei wenji* 白薇文集 (Collected Works of Bai Wei, 2013) to reconstruct the four stages of Bai's playwriting career, arguing that it is overly simplistic to define her plays as "unproducible." Instead, critics should see the experimental nature of her approach in playwriting and publishing as a negotiation between her private impulse and the mainstream aesthetics that articulates the complexity of modern women's struggles in a printed medium without the practical limitations of theatrical productions. Ultimately, Keung argues that theatricality

should not be the main criterion with which to judge the artistic value of Bai's dramatic texts. Arguing for the irrelevance of producibility, Keung's research probes deeply into Bai's theatrical intentions and practices in order to reach the conclusion. While it does the valuable work of contextualizing Bai's plays and opens doors to their reevaluation in several critical directions, it does not account for the theatrical impulses in Bai's scripts and their link to the specific theatrical and cultural contexts, the main goals of this thesis.

1.4 Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The lack of production and staging documentation renders it difficult to consider Bai's works in a theatrical context. This paper adopts the method of production analysis detailed in Milhous and Hume's book *Producible Interpretation: Eight English Plays, 1675-1707* (1985). The authors evaluate each play examined in the book based on six kinds of investigation: close reading; analysis of the original cast and reception of the original production; study of the scenery and machines required for performance; historical reading of 17th-century values; survey of the play's production history; and an analysis of modern critical opinions. To conduct a production analysis is more about asking "How could it be done?" than "How was it done?" (32). They believe that a producible interpretation can be independent of specific productions, therefore freeing the stage-worthiness of the script from the yoke of the numbers of production records. Meanwhile, the producible interpretation still maintains a close relationship with the production history (or lack thereof) as the historical context under the practical requirements of which it develops. By applying such a method to Bai, I will be able to trace the theatrical implications in the scripts based on the historical conditions and cultural trends of Republican China without the constraints of limited staging records.

This thesis also draws upon Lo and Gilbert's model of intercultural theatre to explain the cultural influences in Bai's work. As is demonstrated in past research, the theatrical techniques and dramatic styles implied in her scripts were heavily influenced by Oscar Wilde's aestheticism and European expressionism. Strikingly, however, few scholars have paid attention to the fact that such cultural influences were filtered through the modern theatre movements in Japan. Bai stated that she admired German symbolic plays such as *The Sunken Bell* by Gerhart Hauptmann (1862-1946) and *The Blue Bird* by Maurice Maeterlinck (1862-1949) (Zeng 1985, 11), the former of which was staged in Japan in 1918 and the latter of which was staged by the Tsukiji Little Theatre in 1925, both entering Bai's knowledge during her nine-year stay (1918-1926) in Japan. Though she never clarified if she was inspired by modern Japanese theatre in the 1920s, she wrote in a performance review commenting on the performance's rich stage effects that it "surpassed the standard of the Tsukiji Little Theatre" (Bai 1935, 16), indicating that when she lived in Tokyo, she did experience modern Japanese spoken drama, or *shingeki*, at Tsukiji where Western expressionism and realism flourished. By drawing upon Lo and Gilbert's model of intercultural theatre that views a theatrical adaptation process as involving multiple cultural sources, social contexts, and authorial agents, I trace the constantly overlooked theatrical techniques in Bai's scripts that imply a Japanese influence to argue that Bai's works do not lack theatricality. Instead, her artistic visions were simply not compatible with the dominant realistic style and the material conditions in Chinese theatre, while they could and had been realized in more advanced theatres such as the Tsukiji Little Theatre in Tokyo.

2. Unrealized Potentials of Modernist Theatre in Early Plays

This chapter conducts a detailed production analysis of Bai's early scripts to unveil their theatrical implications in four aspects: acting, casting, set design, and stage effects (lighting, sound, etc.). It aims to challenge the arbitrary correlation between the lack of staging records, unconventional modernist style, and low theatricality in Bai's early works by revealing their rich theatrical intentions and potentials. The theatricality of Bai's unstaged or rarely staged scripts positions Bai at the center of several theatrical trends in Chinese history: the intercultural exchange between China, Japan, and the West; the transition from various modernist experiments to a predominance of realism in Chinese spoken dramas; and the rise of women's independent identity within the male-dominated field of theatre and the androcentric nationalist culture.

2.1 Acting

To understand the acting choices in Bai's plays, it is essential to grasp two founding features of Bai's modernist style: her feminist agenda derived from personal experience and the prioritizing of the subjective experience over objective representation. During the 1920s when Ibsen's social drama and Wilde's aestheticism entered China, Chinese playwrights created an array of "Nora" and "Salome" plays (original, adapted, or translated) that advocated women's rebellion against the feudal family and the pursuit of freedom of love. In most such plays by the pioneering male intellectuals, the female identity is appropriated as a mere symbol of anti-feudal politics with no consideration for women's practical living conditions or their own voice and experience. For instance, Tian Han reshaped Salome in his 1921 translation of Wilde's original work into the traditional Chinese trope of "chaste and heroic virgin" (Yen 2018, 206) who would commit suicide to avoid sexual defilement, a

perfect embodiment of the translator's nationalist ideal that is deprived of the feminine desire in the original play. Hu Shi's *Zhongshen dashi* 终身大事 (The Main Event in Life, 1919) mimics Ibsen's *A Doll's House* by letting the heroine run away from home in defiance of an arranged marriage without indicating the dilemma a woman might face at the threshold of the feudal morality and the still largely patriarchal society beyond. As is stated by the leading writer and scholar Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881-1936), considering the practical circumstances women struggled under in Republican China, it was most likely that these revolutionary "Noras," after running away from home, would either "fall into degradation or retreat into the household" (Lu 1924, 1219). In alignment with the androcentric nationalist politics at the time, the prevailing "Nora" and "Salome" plays by male intellectuals overlook the realistic struggles of women who fail to escape their families and the confusion of those who escape only to find themselves trapped in the new patriarchy of a capitalist society without an independent identity.

Distinguished from the "Nora" and "Salome" plays that appropriate gender as a tool for nationalist agenda, Bai's works unveil women's disillusion in love, family, and the revolutionary society by drawing upon her personal experience and the cultural and social dynamics of her time. Having escaped from an abusive arranged marriage only to find herself betrayed and deserted by her lover, the famous poet Yang Sao 杨骚 (1900-1957), Bai struggled in destitution and experienced first-hand how women were violently oppressed by the old patriarchal system of feudal morality and how, even after the democratic revolution, women's agency was consumed by economic and political limitations and the illusion of freedom in romantic love. Featuring recurrent themes such as heartbreaks and betrayals in romantic relationships, harassment and rape by landlords or warlords, bursts of fury and

desperation after long-endured oppression, and a fierce desire for emancipation, Bai's plays assert an individualistic narrative that vividly embodies women's physical and psychological sufferings instead of presenting mere symbolic gestures of defiance against feudal morality. The allegedly excessive emotionality and "hysteria" in Bai's scripts criticized by scholars are in fact commensurate with such a theme of female sufferings.

To convey the gender politics and to center the female subjectivity, Bai adopts a distinctively modernist style that prioritizes emotional catharsis and psychological realism over objective representation. As the fountainhead of her neo-romanticism, *Miss Linglee* can shed a light on Bai's early style. Finished in 1925, *Miss Linglee* is both a tribute to Bai's lover Yang Sao and Bai's self-reflection on the topic of women's love and independence. The heroine Linli is involved in a love triangle with her lover, Qinlan, and her sister, Lili. Qinlan wants to break up with Linli and starts to fall for Lili instead in the first act. The subsequent two acts follow Linli's dreams in which the God of Time and the God of Death persuade her to give Qinlan up while she persists in fighting for her passion and love only to find out that Lili is pregnant with Qinlan's child. The disillusioned Linli follows the Goddess of Purple Rose into the realm of eternal peace (to drown in a pond surrounded by flowers). Qinlan is torn to pieces by three wild chimpanzees soon after her death. At the end of the play, Linli wakes up and decides to leave town to pursue her life goals, indicating that the previous two acts are all but a dream. In this neo-romantic play, structured dramatic conflicts and coherent plot development are set aside in favor of the portrayal of the characters' subjective experience. Dreams and illusions disrupt the linear time and the rigid frame of physical space, bringing out the characters' complex psychology. Symbolic characters such as the God of Time, the God of Death, and the killer chimpanzees fill the stage to represent

Linli's inner struggle between love and death. Bai is clearly drawing upon the modernist style that originated in Europe and was later imported to Japan and China through translations of dramas such as *Salome*, *The Sunken Bell*, and *Blue Bird*.

The strong modernist feature is demonstrated in Bai's indication of acting style. Bai's characters, in their moments of passion and pain, often deliver rapid movements, symbolic gestures, and fragmented speeches, all of which are expressionistic acting techniques that deviate from the mimetic acting of naturalism. For instance, when Linli tries to express her longing for emancipation from her obsessive love with Qinlan, she shouts:

Ah! Go, go! Go tonight or tomorrow? Go with the silent light of the night! Oh, miserable old life, I say farewell to you!... To me, you are the iron chain on the prisoner's body. Iron chain! I throw you beyond the skyline! (*She act as if unlocking the chain and throwing it away*)... I will tread, step by step, towards the road in the sky of rain and rainbow; I will swim, wave over wave, towards the clouds at dawn that shine with the morning light.⁶ (Bai 1925, 34)

The agitation of the mind is emulated in the extremely fast-paced speech and the exaggerated movements of "go," "tread," and "swim." The gesture of unlocking the invisible chain and throwing it away serves as a symbolic marker of the character's longing for emancipation. With her excited movements, Linli projects her inner passion onto the entire stage and pushes the audience to feel what she feels. An expressionistic acting style thus serves not to stage an illusion of objectivity or a representation of surface reality but to create a psychological realism that centers female subjectivity.

The expressionist acting style becomes more distinctive as Bai's writing skill

⁶ All of the translations from the original scripts are by the author.

progresses, culminating in *Breaking Out of the Ghost Pagoda*, Bai's most popular play. The play depicts women's efforts of breaking out of the cage of feudal families and patriarchal oppression during a time of national upheaval. Three women who live or have lived under the control of the tyrannical landlord, Hu Rongsheng, take different approaches to escape the degenerate household. Xiao Sen, once a respectable maiden raped by Hu, returns after years of education as the representative for the Women's Federation to negotiate a divorce between Hu and his seventh concubine, Zheng Shaomei. Zheng marries Hu unwillingly but seeks freedom by divorcing him and dedicating her love to Hu's son Qiaoming, a progressive student who wants to marry Yuelin and escape his father's control. Yuelin, the daughter of Xiao Sen and Hu Rongsheng, was left behind by Xiao and adopted by Hu who tries to rape and marry her without knowing her origin. Yuelin suffers from psychological disorders and seems to succumb to Hu's control after Qiaoming is killed by Hu in a fight to protect her from his father. She comes to her senses in the end and shoots Hu dead with the aid of Xiao and Zheng. Unfortunately, Yuelin is fatally injured in the process and dies in Xiao's arms, finally knowing her biological mother and shouting in relief: "I have broken out of the ghost pagoda!" (Zeng 1985, 331).

One of the most prominent examples of acting in this work is Bai's signature use of "laughter." In their moments of passion and desperation, Bai's female characters repeatedly burst into different types of frantic laughter within a short period of time. When Yuelin confronts Hu and tries to kill him for revenge, she alternates between gestures of defiance and eruptions of laughter: she "pretends to smile softly" (Zeng 1985, 322) when refusing Hu's invitation to run away with him, "laughs madly" (322) when Hu tries to persuade her, and "guffaws" (323) when Hu says he will give her all his money if she comes. Within two

short pages of the script, the stage space is sliced into pieces by Yuelin's dashing movements and the soundscape is fragmented by the piercing, sporadic laughter in several registers. Instead of serving a mimetic function in naturalistic acting style, the laughter demands a more expressionistic theatricality. It builds from a visceral, subjective experience of extreme psychological pressure and its cacophonies appeals to the audience's compassion by arousing affects of anxiety and discomfort with the loud volume and fast tempo.

The expressionist acting style can also be identified in confrontational moments where the characters scream out broken and repetitive words with an eruption of emotions. In *Ghost Pagoda*, Ling Xia, Yuelin's other suitor and a member of the Farmer's Association trying to overthrow the tyrannical rule of the landlord Hu, is betrayed by his comrades and imprisoned because of Hu's framing. Furious and frustrated, Ling guffaws and shouts:

Ha ha ha! Before, I could not stand the darkness and oppression of our society. I rebel, I jump and I escape. But the human world is dark and filthy all around. Where do I go? *(He delivers enraged bitter laughter.)* Ha ha ha! Die? Yes, die! ...Minds are corrupted by filthy germs. Everyone over twenty should die! Everyone over ten should die! Die! Die! *(He raises his fist furiously and punches the table.)* All die! All die! All die! Now the revolution is in the hands of breastfed infants! Only breastfed infants can lead the revolution now! (Zeng 1985, 303)

Ling's frantic passion is later echoed by Yuelin when she finally kills Hu at the expense of her own life and sings at the brink of collapsing:

Hahaha!...

Resolution points out my direction:

I die, die, die...

Return my life! Return my life!

Death teaches me how to live anew! Death teaches me how to live anew!

We fight everything with death,

We are reborn, reborn! (330)

Such monologues are highly reminiscent of the “characteristic ‘Schrei (scream)’ acting reducing speeches to inarticulate exclamations and cries” (Oya 2013, 421) in Tsukiji Little Theatre’s 1924 expressionistic production of *Die Seeschlacht* (The Sea Battle, 1917). Schrei ecstatic acting can “create an enormous emotional pressure which would eventually explode in expansive gestures and long passionate monologues. Words and gestures were fired like bullets or came rushing forth in resounding aural and visual avalanches” (Kuhns 1997: 105). In the case of Ling and Yuelin, with their frantic repetition of “die,” the Schrei monologues turn speeches into incomprehensible screams with an almost lyrical rhythm. For Ling, the desire to “die” originates from his desperation and anger towards a failed battle against the landlord Hu, a reflection of Bai’s critical opinion on the setbacks of the national revolution. For Yuelin, it is the ecstasy at the sight of patriarchy’s defeat (Hu’s death) and a cry for hope and emancipation in the last minutes of life, a vivid embodiment of Bai’s feminist passion and her artistic impulse to portray women’s rich inner world. In either case, the literal meaning is suspended for the sake of ecstatic emotions and the characters’ rich psychological experience is materialized on stage with exaggerated voices and physical movements.

In a sense, Hong Shen was right in saying that Bai’s style would be difficult to stage without the participation of talented actors, since it would then be hard for the Republican Chinese audience to grasp the purpose of the seemingly absurd and “hysterical” acting. Yet if

properly performed, such an expressionistic style does hold production value, as would be demonstrated in the 1929 production of Hong Shen's *Zhao yanwang* 赵阎王 (Yama Zhao, 1922) by the *juyishe* 剧艺社 (Dramatic Art Society). Adapted from the expressionistic play *The Emperor Jones* (1920) by American dramatist Eugene O'Neill, *Yama Zhao* tells the tragic story of Zhao Da, a military commander's bodyguard who, disappointed by the commander's failure to pay his salary for five months, robs the payroll money and flees into a nearby jungle. All acts apart from the first and the last are set in the jungle where Zhao hallucinates and struggles with his dark memories and conflicted morality. Just like in Bai's plays, Zhao's mental struggles are conveyed through frantic speeches and movements. The show's 1924 debut failed partly due to the unprofessional performance by *wenmingxi* (civilized drama, the early version of spoken drama popular in the 1910s that draws its acting style from Japanese *shinpa*, or new school drama⁷) actors who were not accustomed to the acting style of spoken drama, let alone an expressionistic one, and thus failed to bring out the interiority of the characters (Zhu 2012). However, the show's 1929 production in which Hong Shen played Zhao was a great hit precisely because of an efficient delivery of the "hysterical" (as is described in his own comments on Bai's work) acting style: "Hong alternated between loud screams and fierce crying. The audience saw all the tragedies of the world in the short two to three hours and... the 'conflicts of the human will' were strikingly portrayed" (Deyou 1929, 2). With an acting style highly similar to Bai, the success of Hong's show indicates that Bai's expressionistic acting can and has the value to be produced.

Besides the Schrei acting, another of Bai's prominent acting techniques revealed in *Miss Linglee* is the prevailing use of song and dance to express emotions and carry symbolic

⁷ See "The Impact of *Shinpa* on Early Chinese *Huaju*" (Liu 2006) for a detailed explanation of the connections between civilized drama, spoken drama, and *shinpa*.

meaning. At the very beginning of the play, Linli sings out her desire and desperation in an unrequited love:

(Linli sings)

The loneliest person is the most extraordinary.

People, do not fall in love!

In love you become ordinary.

In love you become ordinary.

The beginning of love

Is the end of life.

In love you become ordinary.

You will chase after love all your life,

hoping that love strikes the chord of life, true and beautiful.

You will chase after love all your life!

Light dances over your body.... (Bai 1925, 7-8)

Also, in Linli's dream, the appearance of the Goddess of Purple Rose is always accompanied by chorus music to which Linli and Qinlan "dance frantically" (106) to express their passion for life and love. In both cases, Linli's inner world is brought out through physical movements and melodies.

This form of integrating modernized song and dance into spoken drama might seem

natural in *Miss Linglee* because of the play's overall poetic style but it certainly stands out in a more realistic play, rendering Bai's decision of maintaining it a deliberate and selective use of unconventional theatrical techniques to enrich her psychological realism. For instance, in *Breaking Out of the Ghost Pagoda*, Yuelin sings a passionate solo before she dies:

(Yuelin becomes more excited and laughs bitterly, dancing to a beatless song:)

Ha ha!... *(She sings.)*

The God of Thunder is bursting through my throat,

I am the bastard child of the monster I killed. *(Others are shocked.)*

See, I am the bastard child without parents!

Who knows me, who understands?

From the bottom of my heart my blood-soaked poem erupts! (Zeng 1985, 328)

Featuring heightened emotions in dynamic lyrics, the song and dance convey Yuelin's ecstatic desperation and the fierce anger towards the feudal patriarchy embodied by Hu. Distinguished from the rest of the play in plain spoken form, the song and dance carve out a piece of the play where time and logic are suspended in favor of a prolonged moment of emotional expression.

Unlike the song and dance in traditional Chinese theatre or Japanese *shinpa* which inspired early Chinese spoken drama, Bai's songs are modernized with poem-like stanzas and reprises typical in contemporary lyrics and the dances are often frantic, indicating a lack of patterned movements. Though no specific stage direction is given regarding how to perform the song and dance, it is clear that they focus more on channeling the characters' emotions through dynamic lyrics and irregular movements than providing the highly stylized

aesthetics in either traditional Chinese theatre or *shinpa*. Since Chinese spoken drama at Bai's time seldom included such song and dance and the Tsukiji productions have long rejected song and dance under the guidance of Osanai Kaoru (1881-1928) who believed that song and dance compromised the theatre's modernist orientation because of their connection to traditional Japanese theatre, this unconventional feature of Bai's scripts probably has another source of inspiration: the song and dance in *shingeki* by the famous actress Matsui Sumako (1886-1919).

Despite the criticism against song and dance among the *shingeki* pioneers such as Osanai, Matsui remained attracted by the song and dance form in dramas. She was famous for her performance of the "Kachusha's Song" in the Japanese theatrical adaptation of Leo Tolstoy's *Resurrection* (1914). She was also featured as Salome in the Japanese production of Oscar Wilde's *Salome* (1915), a femme fatale character who would seduce the King with her erotic and passionate "dance of the seven veils." In the Japanese production of *The Sunken Bell* (one of Bai's favorite expressionistic plays) by *shingeki* leader Shimamura Hōgetsu (1871-1918) in 1918, Matsui Sumako played the fairy maiden Rautendelein, an excellent singer and dancer. A closer look at Matsui's songs reveals that they share the same modernized style as Bai's lyrics. For instance, the Katyusha's Song is composed by Nakayama Shimpei in 1914 in a popular music form "somewhere between traditional Japanese folk music and that of the European hymn-school song-lieder type" (Nakamura 1991, 264). With the poetic lyrics in stanzas and reprises and the repeated addition of the nonsensical "la la" syllables in an attempt to channel nuanced sentiments and "combine an easy and common touch with an exotic European feel" (264), the song impressed the audience with its fresh modernity. Meanwhile, Matsui's dances, for instance, the dance in

Salome choreographed by Italian director Giovanni Vittorio Rosi, broke with the traditional stylized *kabuki* gestures that could not convey the “overt sensuality required for the role” (Kano 2001, 222) and vividly embodied Salome’s aggressive personality. Matsui demonstrated how modernized song and dance could be dynamically integrated into the spoken drama form to attract the audience, express the characters’ emotions, and shape their personalities. Considering Matsui’s leading role in the expressionistic and aesthetic plays Bai favored (*The Sunken Bell* and *Salome*) and her long-lasting popularity in Japan (especially because her songs were recorded, commercialized, and thus widely spread), it stands to reason that Bai might have heard of her practice and drawn inspiration from it.

2.2 Casting

The acting style and feminist agenda in Bai’s plays necessitates both mixed-gender and gender-appropriate casting. In Republican China, “while actresses started playing female characters in the mid 1910s, gender-appropriate casting only became a standard practice in the 1920s” (Liu 2009, 35), before which all-male casts with men impersonating women in highly stylized manners dominated the stage of both civilized dramas and early spoken dramas. It should be noted that the practice of mixed gender and gender-appropriate casting was not entirely new and rare by the time Bai returned to China. Hong Shen’s 1924 production of *Shao nainai de shanzi* 少奶奶的扇子 (The Young Mistress’s Fan, an adaptation of Oscar Wilde’s *Lady Windermere’s Fan*) is generally considered the first spoken drama with mixed-gender and gender-appropriate casting), a practice followed by other productions in Shanghai. At the same time, it is worth noting that Bai, even in her earlier neo-romantic plays, implies such a casting choice through the acting style and the feminist message, which indicates her critical reflection on gender issues in Republican China and

partly accounts for her popularity among school productions.

Unlike most of the spoken dramas at her time that are mainly dialogue-driven, Bai's plays are heavy on their implied physicality. For one thing, the expressionistic acting style, with its fierce screams and frantic physical movements, is incompatible with the highly stylized acting of men impersonating women in civilized dramas. For another thing, Bai's plays feature representations of physical violence, especially that between the men and women. For instance, in *Ghost Pagoda*, Yuelin is constantly "dragged," "grabbed," or "violently hugged" (Zeng 1985, 324) by Hu before she "courageously pushes back" and confronts him with a gun. The show constructs an intensely physical world whose inhabitants vividly embody the disparate power relationship between the strong and overpowering bodies of the male perpetrators and the slight female bodies struggling under the weight of patriarchal oppression. In a gender-appropriate production, Bai's scripts would have mercilessly enacted the female bodies' mutilation by in patriarchal violence and oppression. The audiences would be challenged, shocked, and more likely prompted to empathize with the heroines and reflect on women's harsh living conditions. Ideally, a gender-appropriate casting would most efficiently demonstrate Bai's feminist theme and achieve the activist function of theatre to push for women's emancipation.

However, Bai's plays were most popular in schools, especially women's schools, with an all-female cast, like the 1930 production of *Rose Wine* listed above. The discrepancy between the ideal casting choice and the realistic one is part of the bigger picture of gender issues in school production casting in Republican China. At the time, schools and the society at large tended to discourage mixed-gender casting in fear of "damaging the reputation" (Bi 1926, 3) of the students and the schools. For instance, the faculty at Yenching University (a

Christian institute with separate female and male campuses) refused to stage the adaptation of *Nu dianzhu* 女店主 (The Mistress of The Inn, from *The Mistress of The Inn* by Carlo Goldoni) by Jiao Juyin 焦菊隐 (1905-1975) on the basis of the negative result of a poll among female students (1). At first glance, what obstructed a mixed-gender casting seemed to be the conservative orientation of the female students. As Bishi commented on the incident, however, while many female students were more socially reserved due to their upbringing in a traditionally conservative environment, the ones who actually wanted to perform would also have been forced to stay quiet to avoid being accused of being “restless” (4) by the school. Thus mixed-gender and gender-appropriate casting still faced strong resistance in such school productions. Meanwhile, in women’s schools, the all-female casting could avoid the risk of mixing male and female students and potentially damaging reputations. It could also render the representation of gendered violence less visually and morally appalling and thus more acceptable. This partly accounts for Bai’s popularity in all-female school productions.

Another possible explanation for the prevailing casting of young female students in Bai’s plays is their autobiographical appeal. Bai’s plays often contain autobiographical allusions because Bai drew on her own embodied experience to portray women’s physical and psychological sufferings. For instance, in act two of *Miss Linglee*, Linli reflects on her bleak prospect: “Sister! Where can I go? Be a wanderer, a beggar, a worker, or a prostitute?” Lili replies: “Although the school hates you deeply, it will be for the best if you stay in Japan and rely on your scholarships” (Bai 1925, 76-77). The reference to a harsh life of poverty, the tension between Linli and the school, and the reliance on school scholarships are all drawn from Bai’s personal experience in Japan. Throughout the play, the three main characters

debate the ethics of and different approaches to romantic love, demonstrating the playwright's own conflicting views on love: on the one hand, Bai, like many educated young women of her time, sees the freedom of romantic love as a challenge to the barrier of patriarchal oppression in the feudal society, thus dedicating herself passionately to her love relationship with Yang Sao; on the other hand, having been betrayed and deserted by Yang, Bai sees the lie of romantic love as another trap that waits to devour the lives and ambitions of women. When Bai herself acted in the leading role in her play (which was the case in the performance of her first play *Sophie* in Japan), the pain and the passion for emancipation performed on stage crossed the threshold of fictionality into the reality, arousing empathy and evoking resonance with their "authenticity." As Bai's life story has long been featured in Republican Chinese newspapers and has drawn much attention from readers, especially female readers, when young female students acted as the heroines in Bai's plays, both the actors and the audience would experience the blurring of the boundary between the stage and the real world, adding to the play's realistic appeal, which is probably why young female students were so passionate about Bai's plays.

2.3 Set Design

The theatricality of Bai's modernist style is fully reflected in her stage designs. Unlike the realistic plays by her contemporaries that were mostly set in confined domestic spaces, Bai's plays have distinctive rural settings in open spaces with fantastical features. Bai describes these spaces with her poetic language, molding them into a synthesis of bizarre shapes and symbolic objects. For instance, *Suffering of the Revolution God* is set in the mountains covered by "ancient pine trees with their jutting limbs and dark green needles" (Bai 1928a:17). The dark tone and the strange shapes of the set elicit depressing emotions

and foreshadow the violence and injustice under the corrupted General's rule. The three acts in the dream play *Miss Linglee* are respectively set in the winter garden where "shadows are thick and dark" (Bai 1925, 1), in front of an ancient temple where "red, white, and green plum flowers bloom" (66), and the wilderness under "a clear blue sky lit by beautiful crisp moonshine" where "yellow grass covers the ground, leaves fall like butterflies, and the chilling autumn wind blows" (130). A dreamlike atmosphere is created through depictions of rich color schemes and the theme of love and death is conveyed through symbolic objects such as the plum flowers and the falling leaves. Wrapped inside the naturalistic cover of endless details is Bai's expressionistic impulse to create moods and atmospheres or to convey abstract ideas through set design rather than to present the specificity of the objective scenery.

Such a style can be identified in the set design by Itō Kisaku (1899-1967) and Yoshida Kenkichi (1897-1982) at the Tsukiji Little Theatre. The construction of a mysterious atmosphere and symbolic meaning in outdoor spaces can be traced in Itō's design for Tsukiji's 1926 production of *En no Gyōja 役の行者* (En the Ascetic), a story of how an ascetic fights against the temptation of the demon god of the mountains based on the Japanese legend of En no Ozunu, a legendary Japanese ascetic who was believed to possess supernatural powers. Just like Bai's design where most parts of the stage are immersed in dark shades, Itō's outdoor scene in the second act positioned disproportionately large stone mountains and trees with bizarre shapes on both sides of the stage, towering over the stage with dark shadows while leaving only a slim crack of the sky in the middle where light seeped through. Meanwhile, stage lights beamed upon the actors, creating small bright spots against the large patches of darkness (Aikawa 2016, 104). The set constructed a mysterious

atmosphere with the overall dark tone and symbolized the tension between the man and the god through the irregular contour of the mountains and trees and the contrast between the scope of the exaggeratedly large set and the actors' bodies, which would be a perfect fit for Bai's rural settings.

A prominent feature of Bai's expressionist set design is its rich symbolic meanings closely intertwined with the character development and stage action. For instance, when describing the surrounding pine trees in *Paradise*, Bai singles out one tree in particular: "One of the pines lays like a sleeping dragon" (Bai 1928a, 17). The lying pine later serves shortly as the General and his lover's seat and thus transforms from a part of the background set to a prop integrated into the stage action. With its irregular shape, the lying pine symbolizes the disorder under the general's rule and thus foreshadows the injustice and chaos. Another prominent example is the "ghost pagoda." In *Breaking Out of the Ghost Pagoda*, the "ghost pagoda" is a metaphor Xiao Yuelin uses to describe Hu Rongsheng's household of feudal patriarchy that haunts her like a ghost and imprisons her like a tower. The connection is entrenched when Hu's concubine Zheng Shaomei reveals that Hu often hides in the shadows and scares her by pretending to be ghosts just to find out if she is having an affair with Hu's son. Though no description is given regarding the pagoda's exterior, it has a strong symbolic presence. The pagoda also has a physical presence: a part of Hu's estate that is built on the remains of an ancient pagoda where the last scene takes place. It is described as a small shed where "the windows and the door are closed, leaving only a beam of dim light seeping through the crack into the dark room" (Zeng 1985, 290). In this room, Yuelin first appears after she sank into mental disorder and succumbs to Hu's control. Dressed like a foreign circus girl and decorated with the pearls, jades, and golden chains Hu imposed on her, she

refuses Shaomei's offer of rescue and laughs frantically, darting around and shouting: "I cannot escape. I will die, die!" (Zeng 1985, 299). The dark and claustrophobic shed constructs a cage that imprisons Yuelin, an extension of the power of the symbolic ghost pagoda.

With its looming shadow and physical presence, the pagoda is a constant reminder of Hu's tyrannical rule over the whole family and a means of visualizing Yuelin's feeling of being suffocated by Hu's oppression and harassment. Therefore, it can be imagined that in scenes other than the indoor scene in the shed, an expressionistic set that situates the pagoda in the background with distorted shapes and shrouding shadows could make explicit the symbolic connection between Hu's oppression and the pagoda, while the indoor space in the shed could be constructed in a modernist manner that amplifies the gloomy atmosphere and Yuelin's stressed state of mind through the structure of the set. As discussed above, Itō's rendering of the giant stone mountains and trees with bizarre shapes that tower over the stage with dark shadows in *En the Ascetic* can be an effective way to build the silhouette of the symbolic ghost tower. For the indoor scene in the shed, Yoshida's design in Tsukiji's 1926 production of *The Merchant of Venice* (Oya 2013, 423) and the 1927 production of *The Hairy Ape* (Aikawa 2016, 160) are both exemplary models. Yoshida followed the aesthetics of Soviet constructivism and utilized cheap scaffolding from building sites to build imposing metal structures that could potentially convey the sense of imprisonment in Bai's play with the barren texture and interlocking framework of the metal. In *The Hairy Ape*, the set was a firemen's forecastle in a cruise ship, a metal cage with a claustrophobic atmosphere very similar to Bai's pagoda shed (Aikawa 2016, 160). Yoshida's constructivist frameworks, combined with the overall dim lighting, could embody Hu's oppression and Yuelin's

desperation.

A practical aspect to consider for Bai's stage design is the budget. Since Bai believed that her plays were more likely to be staged in "remote regions or student fairs" (Bai and He 1983: 142) with minimal material resources, her artistic vision for a symbolic design under stringent budgets might also have been inspired by the set design at Tsukiji. For example, by "[r]ecycling such basic components as grey panels, colonnade, steps and swathes of cloth" in the theatre's 1925 production of *Julius Caesar*, Itō "achieved the stylization that Craig had advocated within the Little Theatre's limited resources and successfully updated Shakespeare by creating the cutting-edge mise-en-scene" (Oya 2013, 422). Apart from the constructivist set of scaffolding that minimized cost, Yoshida's set design for the 1925 production of *Mushi no seikatsu* 虫の生活 (Life of Insects) also utilized "simple accessories to suggest the environment of each scene, which unfolded smoothly with few pauses" (Senda 1992, 236, quoted in Aikawa 2016, 65; Yoshida 1971, 166). Featuring neutral and non-representational blocks that orchestrated light and shadow in interaction with the stage actions, both designers' sets could represent a wide range of objects in the open spaces with the limited number of set pieces while creating strong atmospheric effects and affording smooth scene transitions. Tsukiji's stage designs achieved the balance between modernist artistry and low budget limits, which would suit Bai's symbolic setting perfectly.

2.4 Stage Effects

In the 1930s when the importation of western stage technologies and equipment increased, pioneering Chinese dramatists first started to notice the importance of stage effects such as lighting and soundscape. Among them, Jiao Juyin and Xiang Peiliang, inspired by Swiss theater designer and theorist Adolphe Appia's (1862–1928) concept of lighting as the

soul of the theatre, wrote respectively in 1933 and 1935 that, rather than merely illuminating the stage, lighting should be used to evoke affective responses from the audience and that the colors of lighting could directly control emotions (Chun 2018, 17). Later, leftist critics such as Zhang Geng 张庚 (1911-2003) would recognize that colored lighting could “arouse the audience’s revolutionary feeling” (Zhang 1936, 607). Ahead of all such discussions, during the 1920s when the technical aspect of the stage has yet to garner ample attention, Bai Wei had already envisioned a holistic theatre whose emotional representation and ideological message could be amplified by a variety of stage effects.

Bai’s plays are characterized by their frequent use of light and color to create moods and atmospheres or to project the characters’ psychology. For example, Bai uses the contrast between an overall dark tone and a concentrated light to highlight subjective experience or bear symbolic significance. Take *Miss Linglee* as an example. The play starts with the following stage direction: “A dark forest in the background. It is dim everywhere. The curtain is drawn but the stage is too dark to see. Only the sound of a women’s voice can be heard” (Bai 1925, 1). Throughout the play, Bai specifies that the stage is dim and dusky, effectively creating a dreamlike atmosphere suitable for the dream play. Furthermore, Linli explicitly states, “before me is an empty darkness; behind me is an empty darkness” (76). The overall dim lighting indicates the miserable and confused state of mind Linli bears in her unrequited love for Qinlan. When Linli first enters this depressingly dark world, “there is a sudden beam of moonlight” (3), indicating her potential for spiritual awakening. Moreover, the lighting is intricately combined with the stage action to push forward character and plot development: when Linli confronts Qinlan in act two and finally breaks up with him, “a stream of silver light” (90) shines upon her, underlining her resolution to break free from her

obsessive love and signaling her final decision of leaving Qinlan (and the dark world) behind. With the contrast of the overall dark tone and the single beam of silver light that shines upon Linli, Bai builds a stage world that is shaped by Linli's inner struggles and her evolving mind state. Lighting is elevated from a mere way of illuminating the stage to a dynamic, expressionistic, indispensable part of the meaning-making process of the play.

Such attention to the balancing of dark and light and its symbolic meaning can be traced in Tsukiji's 1924 production of Ibsen's *John Gabriel Borkman*. Kaoru Osanai's plan for the production specified that the lighting should "emphasize (realistically) the parts of the stage that relate to the outside, such as windows and doors, and make the other parts as dark and obscure as possible" (Osanai 1965, 251). The lighting scheme effectively shapes the naturalistic room into a hopeless void through the overall dark tone and drew the audience's attention to the windows and doors that symbolized escape or emancipation with the small patches of concentrated light. In the Chinese context, the effectiveness and production value of such a lighting scheme would also be proven in Hong Shen's 1929 production of *Yama Zhao*:

From the second to the eighth act, [*Yama Zhao*] did not utilize footlights at all but instead used baby spotlights. This way, although we could not see clearly Zhao's facial expressions, the gloomy and miserable plot was better portrayed. After all, in this show, the movement of the limbs and the body was much more important than the facial expressions. (Deyou 1929, 2)

Similarly, Bai's utilization of the contrast between the overall dark tone and concentrated light created by spotlights instead of footlights to emphasize the characters' physical

movement and visualize subjective experience would appeal to the Republican Chinese audience.

Another unique feature in Bai's plays is the prevailing use of morphing atmospheric lighting with rich color schemes. In *Miss Linglee*, at the beginning of act two (the first scene of Linli's dream), "the curtain opens to reveal the stage immersed in dark red light. A beautiful song is heard near the bamboo forest. The red light recedes and the moonlight pours down instead... and the stage is bathed in an orange glow" (Bai 1925, 66-67). With its lush colors, the morphing atmospheric light signals to the audience that this is the start of a dream sequence distinguished from the previous act in reality and draws the audience into the poetic and mysterious environment, paving the way for the subsequent encounter between Linli and the fairy-like Lili in her dream. The dark red light starts the scene on a low note, indicating Linli's confused and depressed mind state reflected in her dream. The moonlight that accompanies Lili's appearance echoes Linli's own entry, suggesting that Linli is projecting herself onto the Lili in her dream. The dreamlike orange hue further shows how Linli elevated Lili into a goddess-like status, a potential rival in her love relationship with Qinlan. Also, the lighting switches from dark and dim to bright purple whenever the Goddess of Purple Rose appears in Linli's dream, creating a mysterious and romantic atmosphere. As the Goddess symbolizes the heroine Linli's devotion to love, whenever the all-encompassing purple light immerses the whole stage accompanied by music and dance of the fairies, the audiences will be immersed in the romantic atmosphere and thus empathize with Linli's affectionate heart. By immersing the audience in the colorful lighting, Bai is able to create a dream world revolving around Linli's subjective experience that visualizes Linli's nuanced thoughts and emotions.

Expressive lighting is also used to appeal to the audience's revolutionary passions and achieve theatre's function of public engagement. In *Suffering of the Revolution God*, at the height of the dramatic conflict when the Revolution God is injured by the General, the God's daughter, the Young Girl, calls for help:

The Revolution God is hurt! That is our enemy! (She points toward the General.) Fight! Everyone! (*She stomps on the ground three times, each time eliciting the sound of bombs. Fire rises from the back of the mountain and storms onto the stage. The young girl's hair waves in the wind like flames in the red light.*) Fight, fight! (*She commands.*)
(Bai 1928a, 40)

The red light that swiftly engulfs the entire stage visualizes both the fire of war and the Young Girl's fury in the face of injustice, endorsing the previously helpless character with an invincible power of nature and signifying the unstoppable torrent of the revolution. Bai thus filters the entire scene through the characters' emotions and appeals to the audience's aesthetics and affects to evoke their passion for the national revolution.

The colorful and flexible lighting was hard to achieve in Chinese theatres at Bai's time due to the lack of advanced lighting systems, which would greatly diminish the artistic appeal of Bai's expressionist theatre. The Tsukiji Little Theatre, however, with its signature installation of the cutting-edge *kuppelhorizont* (or Fortuny cyclorama dome), had demonstrated the possibility of complex indirect lighting in Bai's vision. Different from the standard flat backdrop that prevailed in theatres at the time, the Fortuny dome is a semi-circular metal structure covered with white or translucent cloth, allowing for indirect atmospheric lighting with smooth transitions between intricate hues of colors, which was

simply impossible with only the standard footlights. For instance, in the theatre's 1924 production of *The Sea Battle*, "near the end of the scene, the entire horizon is dyed with red lighting" (Yoshida 1971, 118), a perfect way to stage the battle scene in *Revolution God*. With such technology, Bai's stage would also be bathed in brilliant rays of red, orange, and purple that could mesmerize the audiences in *Miss Linglee*.

Another aspect to note in Bai's technical design is the rich sound effect that not only serves to create spectacles but is also an integral part of the stage action. In the *Revolution God* case cited above, the sound effect works in tandem with the lighting and the acting. Apart from the "sound of bombs" at the Young Girl's stomp, the Fairy of Thunder would also stomp and elicit striking sounds of thunder. The bomb and the thunder punctuate the imposing momentum of the Young Girl and the fairies' rage, evoking the audience's indignation towards the injustice caused by corrupted warlords like the General and calling for their revolutionary action in real life. Due to technical limitations in the Chinese theatre of the time, especially in the school productions that usually favored Bai's plays, the sound effect would have been hard to achieve. Not so at the Tsukiji Little Theatre, however, as it had demonstrated such a possibility in *The Sea Battle*: "the Little Theatre production offered a synthetic experience, enhancing Goering's script by Kenkichi Yoshida's three-dimensional stage set, Sei Wada's sound effect recreating the deafening explosion of bombs" (Oya 2013, 421). Such technical support would largely fulfill Bai's vision of a holistic theatre experience enriched by a corresponding soundscape.

Unlike many other Chinese dramatists, such as Tian Han, who stayed in Japan and learned from Japanese theatre trends but returned to China before Tsukiji's time, Bai had the chance to witness the advanced lighting and sound technologies at Tsukiji and, more

importantly, how they could be integrated into the play not only to create spectacles but to facilitate the plot, shape the characters, and channel the audience's affective response. Close readings of her plays yields ample evidence that Bai incorporated rich and challenging sound effects as well as nuanced lighting patterns involving contrasts between light and darkness and a wide range of colors. Such choices effectively facilitated her expressionistic style with a focus on subjective representation.

3. The “Realistic Turn”

From 1929 onward and especially after she joined the Left-wing Dramatists League in 1930, Bai’s plays shifted from a mainly neo-romantic to a predominantly realistic style. Past research tends to evaluate the shift as Bai’s attempt to discard her past “unrealistic” obsession with romantic love themes and unstageable dramatic writing in order to become more “down to earth.” However, as this chapter will explore, Bai’s shift is much more nuanced because she retains certain neo-romantic dramatic techniques to enrich the theatricality of the now overall realistic style. This chapter proposes that, rather than interpreting the shift as a clean break with the past, it would be more beneficial to recognize Bai’s effort in balancing the theatre’s public engagement function and modernist aesthetic experience, a decision firmly grounded in the cultural and political context of Republican China, a feminist passion born out of her embodied experience, as well as her artistic impulses for theatre-making.

3.1 Taking on Realism for Public Engagement

Bai’s realistic turn is fully revealed in how she adapts the neo-romantic *Suffering of the Revolution God* (1927) into the realistic *Paradise* (1931). As early and later versions of the same story conceived during the Northern Expedition, the two plays criticize a corrupted general who runs away from his military duties, gathers wealth to hide in the mountains, and lures or forces young girls to become his concubines. *Paradise* does away with the fantastical plots and symbolic characters in *Revolution God*. The originally nameless characters who are merely the embodiment of ideologies are given names and background stories to be better situated in the historical context and the realistic plot: the General is now Dai Tian and he does not transform into a greedy tiger after being beaten by the Old Man as is the case in

Revolution God; the Old Man is no longer the Revolution God in human form but rather Dai's teacher many years ago, who retreats into the mountains with his daughter, the Young Girl, to shelter and teach children in a temple and to avoid the war. The ending is much more realistic as well: without the magic of nature originally possessed by the Revolution God, the Old Man has no power over general Dai in battle. Nearly beaten to death, he has no choice but to watch Dai abduct his daughter and burn down the temple with his students inside. It is clear that the realistic style is purposefully adopted to shape the play into a more credible reflection of the political and social currents for the general public, a theatre of the people easy to relate to and perform, which embodies Bai's ideal of encouraging leftist passion.

Such a shift is reflected in every aspect of Bai's theatrical techniques of this period. Discarding the Schrei ecstatic aesthetics, the acting in Bai's realistic plays becomes much less "hysterical" and more reliant on logical dialogues rather than emotional monologues. For instance, *Aunt* features a middle-aged woman (the Aunt) in a capitalist, patriarchal, and hierarchical society. Having suffered domestic violence and extreme poverty in her arranged marriage in the village and possessing no other means to feed herself and her family, the Aunt works as a maid and nanny for her sister-in-law (the Mother), a snobbish housewife in a bourgeois Christian family in Shanghai. The Mother despises the Aunt because of her low social status and forces her to work even when she has a severe illness. Saline⁸, one of the daughters, is the only person in the family who cares for the Aunt. During Saline's conversations with the sick Aunt where the Aunt recounts her tragic past in the village and her miserable life in this household, there are plenty of opportunities for a Schrei monologue to visualize her inner turmoil and Saline's compassion for her or anger towards the cruel

⁸ For the daughter's name, Saline (and those of the other children of the family, Pauline and Fields), Bai used English in her original script, probably to show that this is a Christian family in Shanghai that follows the Western way of life (and naming).

Mother. Yet, Bai adheres strictly to a realistic style, letting the Aunt recount in a perfectly comprehensible dialogue facts that reflect the injustice of capitalism, the damage of an ongoing war on common people, and the oppression of the feudal patriarchy in rural areas. Saline responds to these facts by proposing possible solutions such as referring the Aunt to work elsewhere, thus driving the plot forward with a rational and carefully arranged exchange of words. The shift from expressionism to realism in acting thus serves to present an “authentic” social reality in which the leftist ideology is rooted.

Correspondingly, the stage design is more naturalistic, transformed from fantastical and symbolic rural settings to urban indoor ones with an emphasis on how they reflect the socio-economic context. *Aunt*, for example, is set in a “house in a Christian family in downtown Shanghai” where:

...Against the left wall stands the Aunt’s crude bed and on the right, the same type of bed is occupied by the Grandfather, an old man over ninety. Between the two beds is a small stool that measures about one by one foot. On the stool are pills, a Bible, Western candles, and a mosquito coil box. Against the right wall is a full pile of sundries, at the down right end of which is a door leading to the room of John, Saline, Pauline, and Fields. (Zeng 1985, 400)

The space is precisely mapped out compared with the settings in Bai’s neo-romantic plays that favor symbolic details and poetic atmospheres over objective specificity. The key parts of the set are tied with social and economic references instead of symbolic subjective experience: the shabby bed and pills indicate the Aunt’s low status and physical sufferings, the Bible and the Western candles imply the family’s Christian belief and well-off economic

status, and the mosquito coil box suggests that it is summer, paving the way for the subsequent description of the Aunt's illness caused by severe mosquito bites. At first glance, Bai has indeed converted to social realism in order to better reach the public and deliver her leftist message. However, a closer look will reveal that, even in the realistic plays, Bai takes pains to preserve elements of the expressive theatricality evident in her neo-romantic plays.

3.2 Retaining and Upgrading Modernist Techniques in Realistic Plays

By retaining and transforming the modernist techniques in her realistic plays, Bai is able to appeal to the audience's emotions and arouse their revolutionary passion. In terms of acting, although the Schrei aesthetics greatly diminish, she retains the use of song and dance. There is a profuse use of song and dance in the neo-romantic *Revolution God: the Old Man* and his daughter make their appearance in a cheerful work song (Bai 1928a, 21); they later sing and dance in a dream-like atmosphere with a chorus of the fairies of water, thunder, flower, and butterfly, who would later help them defeat the General (30). *Paradise* does away with the fantastical and supernatural features but the Young Girl and the Old Man still make their entrance with the work song; the song and dance with the fairies are reshaped into a scene where the father and daughter teach kids in the village to perform a choreographed revolutionary hymn dressed in fairy costumes. Separate from the main plot, the song and dance create a lively and hopeful mood through the vigorous melody, energetic movements, and spectacular stage effects that would drastically contrast the grim ending where the old man is injured, the kids are burnt to death, and the young girl is abducted. Its metadramatic form of a play within a play comments on how fragile and illusory the safety of sanctuary and the hope of a better future (as is embodied by the children) can be during the war. The song and dance thus evoke the audience's anger and prompt them to fight such injustice in

real life.

In the previous chapter I explored how Bai's early plays are strongly driven by physical representations, especially those that expose the oppression inflicted on the female body. Bai's realistic plays retain the emphasis on physicality and ground the acting in women's embodied experience of pain. In *Paradise*, the young and intelligent female student Ding Rui tries to persuade her friend Fan Ying not to become the general Dai Tian's concubine but fails. Upon Dai and Fan's exit, Ding is abducted, raped, and eventually killed by corrupted soldiers, highly possibly under Dai's order: "Ding wanders alone in the woods, sulking. A while later, two large and strong soldiers approach and suddenly cover her mouth with a piece of cloth from behind. They savagely beat her and tie up her hands and feet before carrying her away triumphantly. Silence falls" (Zeng 1985, 356). With the detailed direction regarding the physical violence and later with Ding's corpse revealed blatantly to the audience on stage, Bai demonstrates the havoc wreaked by military violence and a misogynous culture on the female body. Similarly, in *Aunt*, special attention is given to presenting the Aunt's fragile body destroyed by violence, poverty, sickness, and the Mother's capitalist exploitation. The sound of the sick Aunt moaning permeates the entire play: the curtain opens with her "soft moaning and miserable humming" (401); every now and then she makes a "deep and long sighing sound" (402). The frequent moaning without literal meaning disrupts the flow of the realistic dialogues, discomforting the audience with both the disrupted tempo of the performance and the implied physical pain. Detailed direction is also given regarding the Aunt's movements and gestures to underline her agony: "[The Aunt] climbs up from bed and limps slowly towards the stairs with her hands holding her stomach. As she holds onto the railings and starts to get down, she collapses on the floor with a loud

thump” (408). Though there is no Schrei monologue to vent her sorrow, the Aunt’s psychological turmoil is visualized in her slow movements and twisted body and forcefully imposed on the audiences through the nuanced acting to arouse their empathy.

In terms of stage design, Bai’s lighting scheme also indicates how she utilizes her neo-romantic impulse of subjective and symbolic representation in realistic plays. In *Revolution God*, the red light engulfing the stage conveys the rage of the Young Girl and the fairies in their battle against the General. In *Paradise*, though the realistic form requires the removal of the supernatural forces and the melodramatic climax of the battle, the red color scheme is transformed and incorporated. Red light permeates the whole play: “It is dusk and the sun is setting. The glistening sky is decorated with red clouds” (Zeng 1985, 349); “The setting sun is half behind the mountains like a basin full of blood and the color of the sunset glow becomes richer” (353); “The sky is filled with bright red clouds” (375). The overall atmosphere of the stage changes alongside the changing hues of the red sky from bright and hopeful to solemn and tragic. The morphing red color indicates the progress of time and symbolizes the changing tides of the revolution. The overall red color scheme heightens the emotions and brings out the leading characters’ desperation and rage in the face of military violence and social injustice under Dai’s rule. Also featured in her other realistic plays such as *The Disaster of War*, the red lighting is Bai’s symbol of revolutionary passion visualized through cutting-edge theatrical techniques.

Alongside her attention to visual effects, Bai also upgrades her soundscape to expand the stage world. In Bai’s realistic plays, the soundscape is frequently used to construct the world beyond the stage with references to reality, drawing in the audience and grounding them in the social context. Bai’s anti-Japanese invasion play *The Disaster of War* starts and

ends with the sounds of cannons and guns firing, jets flying, and people screaming outside the window, all of which are heard from backstage throughout the play. Though the play is set inside the family's house and there is no visual depiction of the war beyond the walls, the soundscape, coupled with the imagination of the audience when no visual is given, could vividly portray the chaos and terror in the streets of Shanghai and the cruelty of the Japanese invaders. The sounds torment the main characters, evoking their different reactions and thus becoming an integral part of the stage action that shapes the characters and pushes forward the plot: the parents of the family, a middle-aged Christian priest and his wife, are terrified by the sounds and finally break down, hiding their cowardice behind the excuse of Christian beliefs of universal love and running away instead of fighting back; the son, on the other hand, shows rage and courage under the onslaught of loud sounds and decides to stay in the house to fight the invaders. Bai's soundscape of war creates stress and tension not only among the characters but also among the audiences with its loud volume, rapidness, and unpredictability, propelling them to contemplate their own choices in the face of such terror. In this way, Bai utilizes the soundscape to convey her revolutionary passion by eliciting affective responses from the audience.

4. Conclusion

Though frequently evaluated as unstageable, Bai's early neo-romantic style presents rich theatricality that is closely linked with the aesthetics and practices in modern Japanese theatre and is used to convey her feminist politics through subjective representation. In terms of acting, Bai utilizes the Schrei aesthetics of expressionist acting and integrates of song and dance into spoken drama, two techniques frequently featured in Japanese theatre of her time, to bring out the characters' psychological experiences. Bai's acting style requires fierce emotional eruption and emphatic, vigorous physical movements that suit both a mixed-gender and gender-appropriate casting. It best fits her feminist agenda and autobiographical impulse and partly explains her popularity among women's school productions. Bai's set design features rural settings with poetic and mysterious atmospheres created by expressionist distortion and the highlighting of symbolic objects that further project subjective experience onto the stage, which were possibly inspired by Tsukiji Little Theatre's stage design by Itō Kisaku and Yoshida Kenkichi. She also integrates stage effects such as atmospheric lighting and rich soundscape to center the characters' experience, another set of choices resonant with the theatre practices at Tsukiji and proven to be effective in the 1929 production of Hong Shen's *Yama Zhao*. In her neo-romantic plays, Bai envisions a holistic theatre of modernist acting and design that would immerse the audience in an intense emotional experience with the aid of all technical aspects of the theatre.

Meanwhile, Bai's "realistic turn" around the 1930s is not an abrupt change that sacrifices the artistic value of modernism for the sake of realism and leftist politics. Rather, the stage techniques of her early plays are preserved and upgraded to better carry out theatre's function of public engagement. Though she removed the Schrei monologues, she

continued to emphasize physicality and use song and dance to channel the audience's emotions and create immersive atmospheres. The rich lighting techniques and soundscape are also transformed in ways that would appeal to the audience's emotions and ignite their leftist revolutionary passion. Instead of completely discarding her early style and converting to social realism, Bai honed the rich theatricality demonstrated in her neo-romantic plays into an integral part of her realistic theatre. In these later works, the techniques allowed her to engage the general public in the historical context of war and revolution without compromising her feminist politics, impulse for subjective representation, or artistic vision for a holistic theatre.

This thesis proves that the arbitrary correlation drawn by past scholars and critics between Bai's unconventional modernist style and low theatricality is a biased judgment based merely on her lack of staging records and an androcentric aversion to her feminine "hysterical" style that prioritizes subjective representation. Such a framing of contemporary Chinese spoken drama history based on the number of staging records also reifies a stereotypical conceptualization of the early 20th-century Chinese theatre and dramatic literature as dominated by social realism and an androcentric nationalist ideology. Through a detailed production analysis, this thesis reveals that what critics assume to be a lack of theatricality in Bai's scripts is in fact a cutting-edge artistic vision of modernist theatre that could not be accommodated by the social and material conditions in Republican China, thus challenging the biased framing and its marginalization of rarely produced female dramatists like Bai Wei.

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