

An Analysis of Cao Yu's Creative Conception of Female Images Transformation in His Plays

Siqi Fang^{1,a,*}

¹School of Arts, Capital Normal University, Beijing, 100089, China

a. 1190109011@cnu.edu.cn

*corresponding author

Abstract: As the Pioneer of Chinese Drama, Cao Yu has contributed a series of distinctive and representative female images to contemporary Chinese literature. However, it exists a great transformation in female image creation and aesthetics in his plays. Divided from 1938, modern women represented by Fanyi, Chen Bailu and Hua Jinzi full of passion for life were celebrated by Cao Yu during the pre-time, while traditional women with classic Chinese flavors got well recognized by him during the post-time, such as Doctor Ding, Sufang and Ruijue. The transformation related closely to his creative conception, reflecting Cao Yu's re-choice of his aesthetic interests, values, and cultural stance. This article analyzed Cao Yu's creative conception from the differences between his two periods of female image creation and aesthetics before and after 1938. In recent years, feminism has been on the rise in China. Therefore, it will not only be beneficial to the Chinese women's liberation movement, but also to the world's women's liberation movement.

Keywords: Cao Yu, female images, transformation, creative conception

1. Introduction

As one of the founders of modern Chinese theatre, Cao Yu has contributed a number of artistically compelling female images to the history of Chinese theatre. Speaking of his own theatre, Cao Yu himself once claimed: "As a theatre creator, I have devoted myself to characters over the years. I always feel that writing theatre is mainly about writing people, and I use my mind on the question of how to portray characters." [1] Each female image in the plays of Cao Yu shows its own unique charm, from the freedom-seeking Fan Yi and Chen Bailu to the traditional women Su Fang and Rui Jue. Meanwhile, we can distinctly feel the difference between the female images in his plays before and after a certain period in 1938. In response to this transformation, most of the current research in this field by domestic scholars focuses on the three aspects of cultural factors, social background, and personal life. Based on previous research, this paper summarizes the reasons for the transformation in Cao Yu's plays and further analyzes the merits of Cao Yu's creative conceptions. From this change, the humanitarianism-impregnated female perspective is reflected. We can also further see the transformation in his thoughts on the path of women's liberation as a playwright rich in social responsibility and a sense of worry, as well as the trend of the times and the creative mindset that shaped this change.

2. Analysis

2.1. Two Types of Female Images in Cao Yu's Plays

Thunderstorm, *Sunrise* and *Peking Man* are Cao Yu's early masterpieces. The women portrayed in these three works are full of passion for life, pursuing liberty and happiness, obeying their own selves, daring to break the shackles of the feudal family and fighting against the whole dark society even at the cost of their own lives. Like the name of the play *Thunderstorm*, Fan Yi is portrayed as the most "thunder-like" character of the female image, "to love passionately like a flame; to hate ragingly like a fire as well" [2]. To get the happiness that belongs to her, she confronted Zhou Puyuan many times and even hurt innocent people. From this perspective, Fan Yi is a typical egoist. However, it is precisely where the charm of her image lies. Despite her adversity, she did not go through life cowardly. Instead of sinking into self-absorption in her dark federal family, she pursued her love. She always harbored hope, perceiving Zhou Ping as her lifesaver and hoping that he would save her from herself. Thus, even though what Fan Yi did is against ethics, readers do not criticize her too much but are more attracted by her unique charm.

Chen Bailu, the main female character in *Sunrise*, shares many similarities with Fan Yi. She was also born into a family of scholars, beautiful and proud. However, due to her family's decline, she ended up as a social butterfly. Although her rebellion is far from catching up with Fan Yi, when her childhood playmate and first love Fang Dasheng comes to the luxury hotel to question her, Chen Bailu still argues with a straight face: "I did not bother with the brain to cheat people. I did not try hard to rob anybody. I have lived a life that others have been willing to maintain, because I have sacrificed myself. I have done the most pitiful duty a woman can do to a man, and I have enjoyed the rights a woman should enjoy!" [3] Although Chen Bailu has fallen into the upper-class society, she still tries her best to protect the Little Girl for her heart always yearning for freedom and equality and the power to protect her "own kind".

In the play *The Wilderness*, Hua Jinzi from the countryside is even more wild and crazy in her pursuit of love. Cao Yu said, "Many of these women have beautiful hearts. However, because of their abnormal growth process and the stifling environment, they become perverse and difficult for common people to understand." [4] Still, these female images in the plays of Cao Yu have always pursued the nature of life and never needed the affirmation of others, seeking their own recognition for themselves only. Therefore, they were pioneers of their time who were completely different from traditional women.

After 1938, the female images in Cao Yu's plays changed significantly. Whether it was Doctor Ding in *The Metamorphosis*, Su Fang in *The Peking Man*, or Rui Jue in *Family*, they always repressed themselves for the sake of others and had a strong spirit of self-sacrifice. Although Doctor Ding still possessed the spirit of pursuing liberty as the female images in plays of early Cao Yu, she was more marked by the concept of patriotism, for she devoted all her life to her motherland. From a moral point of view, she was the noble one; but from a personal point of view, she sacrificed all her love and affection. It differs from female images such as Fan Yi in Cao Yu's early plays. As for the women portrayed by Cao Yu after the end of the Second Sino-Japanese War, such as Su Fang and Rui Jue, we can no longer see female images like Fan Yi in them.

2.2. Commonalities Between the Two Types of Female Figures

Firstly, we can see from the above analysis that whether in the early or late period, Cao Yu's female images are full of strong emotions, manifested in the ardent pursuit of love or in a passion for the motherland. It is a unique feature of Cao Yu's writing. As scholar Zhu Donglin said, "In any of Cao Yu's works, there are depictions of passionate love." [5] Fan Yi indeed longed for emotional

redemption from Zhou Ping. It is unlike other women with the spirit of “May Fourth”, for the freedom she sought was only the most basic lust of a woman. It is this intense lust that pushes her to the extreme path of violating ethics. Just as Cao Yu once mentioned: “From time to time, people cannot help but return to the primitive, barbaric, and blood-shedding routine. In this routine, you have to choose a strong feeling, either hate or love. Everything goes to the extreme there, burning, thundering. There is no easy way to compromise in the middle.” [6] Even his later works are filled with the same intense feelings. For example, in *The Metamorphosis*, Doctor Ding’s sacrifice of his only son to save others is touching. But what is most impressive is Dr. Ding’s self-sacrifice in the face of love. Although Rui Jue and Ming Feng in *Family* are traditional women, their unresisted pursuit of love is even more unforgettable.

The female images in Cao Yu’s plays have one thing in common: their pursuit of love. They may have gone to the extreme, but they always tried their best to find their own value for survival. It also leads to a new problem, namely, women’s excessive pursuit of love and even to a certain extent, placing the rest of their lives in the hands of men. It makes the women in Cao Yu’s plays never free from the bondage of patriarchy. Perhaps the playwright himself did not find another viable way for female liberation at that time, which is a shortcoming in Cao Yu’s creative conception.

Secondly, the reason why the female images portrayed by Cao Yu in his later period changed is closely related to the social situation at that time. Of course, the later stage of Cao Yu’s creation should not be reduced to a formulaic and conceptualized creation mode. The idea of “humanity cultivation” has always been dominant in Cao Yu’s creation of plays [7]. When composing *Wang Zhaojun*, he said, “She is a woman with real feelings, never the kind of feelings that a slave girl has for an emperor, but sincere love.” [8] Talking to the image of Qiu Hu in *The Wilderness*, Cao Yu admitted, “At that time I had such an idea to write such an artistic image. A man with a black face is not necessarily dark at heart.” [9] From this, we can see that Cao Yu differs from other writers in modern Chinese theatre history. Instead of focusing on concepts such as “ethnicity” and “nationhood”, his plays focused on “humanity”. The playwright’s creations are still subconsciously influenced by social life, and his characters are involuntarily at the mercy of traditional ideas. At the same time, Cao Yu has always emphasized the experience of life, which was verified in his later plays such as *Wang Zhaojun*. He had worked at the grassroots level for a long time just to create the best version of *Wang Zhaojun*. He commented on this by saying, “It is necessary for the play to go along with the task of the era. Plays on big subjects are entirely worth writing. But when we merely recognize rationally that we should write about it, and don’t love it enough, we don’t write about it yet; we get to know it first.” [10] Besides, “If we neglect to write about real people, real life, then we will have only representative characters in our writing, not real-life people, not the kind of people who are alive and not at all contrived. That kind of representative character will not be remembered.” [11] Therefore, Cao Yu’s characters are never created out of thin air. They are products of their times. Each female image has its own unique charm, even the same type of women. As pioneering woman of the era, Fan Yi is highly enthusiastic, Hua Jinzi is spicy and bold, and Chen Bailu is contradictory and entangled, each with their own unique characteristics. From this aspect, we can see that Cao Yu still adheres to his own creative conceptions. In addition, we can also see that Cao Yu’s later dramatic creations did not surpass his earlier ones, not because he was confined to the whirlpool of formulaic conceptualization but for other reasons [12].

Thirdly, Cao Yu was subconsciously influenced by traditional Chinese culture. Although he was quite influenced by Western culture in his early days, traditional cultural factors always permeated his creations. Generally speaking, foreign cultures or later impressions, in a certain period of time, will hover on the surface of the consciousness for their novelty and originality and influence the subject’s way of perception. On the other hand, the cultural influences of the early years and the aesthetic interests cultivated in his life experiences will be hidden in the deep structure of the art form

he would adopt [13]. As for the view of destiny in *Thunderstorm*, some scholars in recent years have looked at the influence of Western culture from the perspective of the Christian view of original sin. It makes sense to a certain degree. But it is influenced by the Chinese saying that “a father’s debt should be paid by his son” and that “virtue is always rewarded and evil punished”. In his later works, Cao Yu returned to tradition, creating a series of kind, hard-working, and straightforward traditional female images. In *Peking Man*, Cao Yu once again returned to his most familiar theme of the feudal family. He further mapped the darkness of the whole society by exposing the corruption of the feudal family, thus creating the traditional female image of Su Fang, who is virtuous, kind, and hard-working. But Cao Yu did not limit himself to this. Through detailed descriptions, he brought out Su Fang’s agonies before she left her family, showing a certain transformation in Su Fang’s mindset. However, feudal ideology did, to a certain extent, keep Cao Yu’s plays in bondage. Scholar Yang Hui criticized *Peking Man* for the people’s hatred of Zeng Siyi, “It is obvious that the author, because of his attachment to feudal morality, unconsciously reveals his emotional bias towards Zeng Siyi.” [14] Regardless of whether this view is theoretically correct or not, as far as the author’s feelings are concerned, it has to be recognized that this view has some truth.

2.3. The Transformation from Drama to Life

The female images portrayed by Cao Yu in his early period were deeply influenced by the spirit of the “May Fourth” social movement. They showed the playwright’s mood of breaking through the shackles of feudalism and changing the gentle and kind qualities of traditional women. It has a strong dramatic character, which is vividly shown in Fan Yi, who owns the same character as “Thunderstorm”. Unlike the female images, who longed for freedom and the same social status as men, written by Mao Dun, a writer of Cao Yu’s time, what Fan Yi wanted was only redemption from Zhou Ping, for lust was the fuse that she dared to break through everything. Love and hate, reason and passion struggle within her, ultimately leading her to choose a path of shocking vengeance. “She has the passion of fire, a strong heart. She dares to break through all the shackles and do a trapped beast fight.” [15] Therefore, many people think that Cao Yu’s Fan Yi is created under the influence of Medea in the ancient Greek tragedy. Indeed, both two female images have a polarized character - if you cannot get it for yourself, you must destroy it. It makes us feel that they deviate from their own social attributes - wives do not look like wives, and mothers do not look like mothers. With the final outburst of their long-suppressed hatred, they are finally driven to desperation. Therefore, even though Medea kills her son and Fan Yi commits incest, readers would not feel ashamed of them but rather comprehend their unique personalities. Hua Jinzi, portrayed by Cao Yu in his work *The Wilderness* of the same period, was bold and spirited, daring to love and hate. She blossomed fiercely like a wildflower amid intense conflicts. Same as Fan Yi, this type of female image has a distinct tendency for dramatization.

After 1938, influenced by various factors, female images in Cao Yu’s plays encountered a tremendous transformation, returning from the intensity of the early days to plainness and beginning to shift toward life. In terms of the factors of the times, in the 1940s, the national crisis intensified, and the idea of individuality and emancipation preached during the “May Fourth” movement period was gradually disillusioned. Cao Yu was also trapped in a creative dilemma at the time, losing his ability to find a new way out for Chinese females. The playwright’s noble sense of social responsibility made him gradually give up hollow writing techniques like symbolism. He began to consciously re-examine the social reality and expand the subject matter of his creation to the whole society. Therefore, as the fate of the nation became heavy again, the traditional female images of enduring heavy loads were once again eulogized. Against this background, female images as Su Fang and Rui Jue were created.

From the point of view of the playwright’s individual life, it is well known that all the female

images full of passion for life in Cao Yu's writings appeared before August 1937, that is, before his marriage with Zheng Xiu. Cao Yu pursued the liberation of individuality, so he chose a partner who was also a pioneering woman. Unluckily, crises lurked in this marriage. It took no long time for beautiful illusions to get crushed by the triviality of daily life. Cao Yu lived in bitterness during this period. It was only after the appearance of Deng Yisheng, a traditional woman, that a glimmer of hope was brought into his life. Japanese scholar Tian Benxiang recorded Cao Yu's "letter swallowing incident", which once stirred up at that time, in his book *The Suffering Soul*. "There was a Mrs. Yang (a servant of the Fang Detang's family) who played the role of delivering the letters. One day, Mrs. Yang came and gave Cao Yu a look, which I saw. Mrs. Yang stayed for a while, and Cao Yu went out. I followed from behind, but Cao Yu didn't notice me. He went to a teahouse, sat down, and read Deng Yisheng's letter. I snatched the letter from his back. It was written on burlap, and some of it was left in Cao Yu's hand, so he ate it without hesitation." [16] By this time, Cao Yu's marriage had broken up. The failure of his first marriage also caused him to change his attitude towards marriage. Cao Yu once recalled his writing of *Family*: "I stayed on that ship for about three months, a whole summer. During this period, after I finished writing a paragraph, I sent the original manuscript to my beloved friends. I always received a warm letter of encouragement, and at the same time made some slight alterations or additions to, or deletions from, the original. In the thick pile of replies, there is also a stack of rewritten drafts of *Family*. Since I wrote *The Peking Man*, all my manuscripts have passed through the hands of beloved friends, either transcribed or altered." [17] This misalignment of aesthetic concept and life reality caused Cao Yu to turn towards female aesthetics and his creative conception. The playwright brought this favorable impression of traditional women into his works, and thus female images of classic beauties such as Su Fang and Rui Jue appeared. It could be seen as a great tragedy for Cao Yu, who once wanted to break the chains of traditional order with the wildness of life.

3. Conclusion

From Fan Yi to Su Fang, the transformation of female images in Cao Yu's plays reflects the change in his creative conception, which is not only affected by the factors of the times and individual life but also profoundly influenced by the cultural conflict between China and the West. In the history of modern and contemporary Chinese literature, this factor of difference has always existed. It is also due to this series of conflicts that Cao Yu's plays have achieved great artistic success. But what is more noteworthy is that the current situation in the process of creation did not control Cao Yu. He always adhered to his principles, which made his female images full of emotions and unique characters. At the same time, traces of traditional culture can be seen throughout Cao Yu's plays. Therefore, Cao Yu's plays are not floating weeds. They are deeply rooted in the history of Chinese theater. It is the unique charm of Cao Yu's plays.

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