

A Study of Thematic Changes in the Performance History of Thunderstorm

Mengyan Wang^{1,a,*}

¹School of Chinese Language and Literature, Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou, Guangdong, 510275, China

a. wangmy99@mail2.sysu.edu.cn

*corresponding author

Abstract: *Thunderstorm* is one of the most important theaters in the history of modern Chinese drama. Since its premiere in 1935, the play *Thunderstorm* has been performed repeatedly. The performance history of *Thunderstorm* is rich in content because there have been as many as a dozen different versions so far. The theme of *Thunderstorm* performances has changed with time. The *Thunderstorm* performances during Republican China and the period of reform and opening up have similar development trends. This paper mainly compares the performance of *Thunderstorm* in the period of Republican China and reform and opening up and grasps the theme change of the performance history of *Thunderstorm* from a holistic perspective. The *Thunderstorm* performances during these two periods both exhibit a popular entertainment trend and pay attention to pursuing human nature liberation. However, they also have differences. During the Republic of China Period, *Thunderstorm* performances were adapted into social problem dramas that focused on anti-feudalism. Nevertheless, the realism principle in *Thunderstorm* performances has been challenged after the reform and opening up, and attention is paid to the themes of life and destiny in *Thunderstorm*. The study of the thematic changes in *Thunderstorm* is of great significance for investigating the canonization and acceptance history of *Thunderstorm* performances.

Keywords: Cao Yu's plays, *Thunderstorm*, performance history

1. Introduction

The play *Thunderstorm* tells a story about the thirty-year feud between the Zhou and Lu families, depicting a tragedy that occurred in a Chinese family with intense feudal colors in 1925. The work consists of six acts, including a prologue and an epilogue. *Thunderstorm* is a landmark in the history of modern Chinese drama. Yet while studies related to its text are abundant, studies of its performance history are slightly lacking. Drama is a comprehensive art with both literary and theatrical aspects [1]. Cao Yu's work *Thunderstorm* was first performed in 1935 (according to the general statement) and has been prevalent until now. This play has been adapted into more than a dozen versions at different times, which makes it the undisputed number one modern drama in China. *Thunderstorm* has a long history of performances, so the related literature is relatively complicated. The thematic change of *Thunderstorm* performances is an important part of studying the performance history of *Thunderstorm*. The performance of *Thunderstorm* can be divided into three stages, namely, the Republican period (1935-1949), the seventeen years after the founding of the People's Republic of

China (1949-1966), and the period after the reform and opening up (1978-present). During the seventeen years after the founding of new China, the performances of *Thunderstorm* were limited to the theme of “class struggle” under the influence of political ideology. The performances in this period are not as diversified as the other two phases. The performance history of *Thunderstorm* in the Republican period and the reform and opening-up period shows similar development trends but is also different. This research aims at grasping the overall transition of the theme of the *Thunderstorm* performances and trying to figure out why the charm of *Thunderstorm* never fades. In the following sections, this paper will describe the performances of *Thunderstorm* during two periods and then compare these performances in order to analyze similarities and differences.

2. The Republican Period: Civilization Drama, Social Problem Drama and Destiny Drama

Before the formal formation of modern Chinese drama, the embryonic form of Chinese drama had already been formed, called “civilized drama.” The “civilized drama” originated in the late Qing Dynasty. It was influenced by Western drama theories, focusing on ideological enlightenment. However, in the early Republic of China, the content of “civilized drama” was limited to family life, showing a degenerate trend. To some extent, “civilized opera” became a pejorative term and lost the connotation of modernity [2]. Chen Dabai believed that “civilized drama” was overly commercialized. Its content was so vile that it was inferior to the so-called “barbaric old drama” [3]. Many intellectuals at that time also held this view. The civilized drama gradually separated from the new drama and amateur play. The play *Thunderstorm* mainly centered on family. The plots of brother and sister falling in love or stepmother and son incest satisfied the public’s curiosity. The twisted and bizarre story makes many performances of *Thunderstorm* in the Republican period focus on family ethical relationships, highlighting its entertainment and popularity. Some works adapted *Thunderstorm* to be as nauseating as “civilized drama,” which, in Cao Yu’s view, was undoubtedly a “bad style” [4]. At the time, some people criticized this kind of adaptation. They argued that *Thunderstorm*, as a drama about social problems, should not be turned into an ethical family drama and that the character of Lu Dahai, in particular, should not be considered as just a rude and upright barbaric boy [5].

The origins of social issue dramas are related to the May Fourth Enlightenment ideology, and most are based on anti-feudal themes. The play *Thunderstorm* reveals the evil of the feudal family and the ugly faces of capitalists. Under the wave against feudalism, adaptation based on realism was the mainstream. The left-wing literary trend also focused on criticizing and exposing the dark reality, emphasizing the realism of the works. *Thunderstorm* premiered at the University of Tokyo’s commercial auditorium on April 27-29, 1935. It was directed by Wu Tian, Du Xuan, and Liu Ru Li, and performed by the Chinese Drama Fellowship, an organization that included Chinese students who stayed in Japan. This performance deleted the prologue and epilogue and laid stress on the character of Lu Dahai as the emerging role [6]. This treatment of the adaptation of *Thunderstorm* as a social issue play was far-reaching. On December 13-15, 1935, the Shanghai Fudan Drama Society also staged *Thunderstorm*, with Ouyang Yuqian as the director. It also cut out the prologue and epilogue of the original play and instead added Lu Dahai’s bright ending. On January 10-12, 1936, the Fudan Drama Society staged *Thunderstorm* again at the Xinguang Theater. *Shen Bao* published large propaganda posters for several days, speaking highly of the actors’ performance and the exquisite stage [7]. It praised *Thunderstorm* as an unprecedented harvest for the stage. Its comment played an essential role in classicizing the social-issue drama version of *Thunderstorm*. On October 13, 1935, the Chinese Traveling Troupe gave a public performance of *Thunderstorm* at New Cinema Theater in Tianjin. It was the premiere of a professional theater company. The performance was a great success with a whole house. After that, it went on tour to Shanghai, Hankou, Changsha, and other places, which made *Thunderstorm* go viral around the country. During the Republic of China period, the version of *Thunderstorm* by the Chinese Traveling Theater Troupe had the longest performance

time, the largest number of performances, and the greatest influence. The Chinese Traveling Theater Troupe's version continued the mainstream adaptation by deleting the prologue and epilogue, exposing societal darkness and treating *Thunderstorm* as a social issue play. The Chinese Traveling Theater Troupe's performance became a chief source that all major theater groups borrowed. *Thunderstorm* was widely accepted as a social issue play [8].

Cao Yu himself was not particularly satisfied with the above adaptations. In his article "The Writing of *Thunderstorm*," he specifically expressed his opinion that the play is a narrative poem rather than a social issue drama. He did not favor the deletion of the prologue and epilogue as their presence diluted the unease and shock in the play, allowing the audience to return to an atmosphere of calmness and longevity [9]. In 1937, the Chinese Drama Society decided to perform *Thunderstorm* in public at the World Grand Theater in Nanjing. Cao Yu himself mentored and played the role of Zhou Puyuan. Cao Yu's portrayal of Zhou Puyuan changed from the solidified image of this character in previous performances, showing more of the character's versatility [10]. This version was the first complete performance of *Thunderstorm*, and probably the closest to Cao Yu's own original intention. It retained the prologue and epilogue, which project the universe and the fate of life. However, Cao Yu's personal involvement in the theatrical experiment of preserving the prologue and epilogue was not a success. The performance of preserving the prologue and epilogue was too long, and the audience's response was not enthusiastic [11]. It can be seen that the performance version of destiny was not popular at that time.

3. Reform and Opening-up Period: The Tragedy of Fate, Entertainment, and Innovation

In order to better understand the *Thunderstorm* performances during the reform and opening up period, the paper first needs to wise up the performance situation about the seventeen years after the founding of the People's Republic of China (1949-1966). In the seventeen years, the most authoritative version of *Thunderstorm* is the one performed by the Beijing Theater of People's Art. On June 30, 1954, the Beijing Theater of People's Art version of *Thunderstorm* premiered at the Beijing Theater, directed by Xia Chun. *The People's Daily* then published an article entitled "The Capital's Public Performance of the Drama *Thunderstorm*," pointing out that the theme of *Thunderstorm* was the contradiction between the Chinese working class represented by Lu Dahai and the national bourgeoisie represented by Zhou Puyuan, highlighting the policy of "making literature and art serve politics" [12]. In 1959, the Beijing Theater of People's Art re-staged *Thunderstorm*. With the anti-rightist campaign gradually tense, the individuality and humanity of the main characters were downplayed. In this version, Zhou Puyuan is a feudal tyrant and a cruel capitalist who exploits the people while Lu Shiping, Lu Sifeng and Lu Dahai are the rebels. The theme of *Thunderstorm* followed the dominant political ideology, conceptualized even worse in public during the Cultural Revolution until it was banned.

After the reform and opening up, performances of *Thunderstorm* resumed. At the end of the long Cultural Revolution, the suppressed humanity could take a breath. People were able to re-examine the treatment of characterization in the previous performance of *Thunderstorm*. Zhou Puyuan preserved pictures of Lu Shiping, and his home was decorated exactly as when Mei moved in, showing that he still had a trace of human feelings. Fan Yi, Zhou Ping, and even Zhou Puyuan were oppressed by the patriarchal power of the feudal dictatorship. In 1989, the Beijing Theater of People's Art revived *Thunderstorm*. There were many innovations in this performance. Zhou Puyuan took off his long gown, which is a symbol of feudalism and wore Western-style clothes instead. The director intentionally emphasized his experience of studying overseas. Moreover, Fan Yi changed her previous gloomy and hostile behavior and highlighted her desire for freedom and love, which weakened the audience's aversion to Fan Yi [13]. However, Xia Chun, the director of 1989's *Thunderstorm*, still considers *Thunderstorm* to be a great work of realism [14]. The adaptation did not depart from the framework of social problem drama and the anti-feudal theme. With the liberation

of ideas and the influence of Western philosophical trends, the prologue and epilogue of *Thunderstorm* were rediscovered. Many people explored the richness of the play's themes in depth. In 1993, the Beijing Youth Arts Theater re-staged *Thunderstorm*, directed by Wang Xiaoying. Wang Xiaoying's version of *Thunderstorm* restored the prologue and epilogue but boldly deleted the role of Lu Dahai. This version of *Thunderstorm* changed the usual performance ideas, deeply explored the characters' inner life experiences beyond the era and society and broke through the realism performance mode [15]. In 2004, the Beijing Theater of People's Art re-staged *Thunderstorm* based on the version in 1989. The director Gu Wei, believed that *Thunderstorm* was written about people's struggles and cries for destiny. The purpose of this version of *Thunderstorm* was to be as close as possible to Cao Yu's original intention [16]. Theater workers at this period tried to break through the Stanislavski system, which was esteemed as the primary in director theory [17]. They turned to abstract philosophical thinking, affirming the religious theme and the contemplation of human nature in the prologue and epilogue of *Thunderstorm*.

In the 1990s, business and the market flourished. With the continuous development of the entertainment industry, the commercial value of the performance of *Thunderstorm* was gradually noticed. The form of *Thunderstorm* performances also changed. In 1997, Li Shaohong adapted and directed the 20-episode television series *Thunderstorm*. This version of *Thunderstorm* focused the narrative on family ethics and romantic relationships. The TV series ended with Zhou Ping choosing to inherit the family business instead of running away from the family. Qiu Huanxing and Xu Anqi argued that such an adaptation was impacted by marketization and that *Thunderstorm* changed the public and political aspirations, as well as religious and value-based concerns of the 1980s, which gradually seeped into marketization and middle-class tendencies in the 1990s [18].

Entering the 21st century, performances with postmodern thinking concepts are all the rage under the wave of postmodernism drama. Attempts have been made to adapt *Thunderstorm* for postmodern theater. In 2012, *Thunderstorm 2.0*, directed by Wang Chong, premiered at the Trojan Theater. The play brought how to shoot a movie to the stage. The actors acted in a two-room house, and the assistant director edited on one side, with the edits always playing on the big screen. There were also organists, voice actors, costume managers, and more. Lines from the original were deconstructed and reorganized. For example, Zhou Ping's words of love to Lu Sifeng were told to Fan Yi, and the discourse of Zhou Puyuan forcing Fan Yi to take medicine was replaced by toasts at the party [19]. In 2013, Fujian People's Art Theater re-told the story of *Thunderstorm* in a deconstructed and experimental way, with the actors simultaneously narrating and playing the roles in the *Thunderstorm* onstage. It gave the audience a novel psychological experience and a more varied stage format [20]. These performances of *Thunderstorm* use subversive methods to deconstruct the classics in the history of Chinese drama. Its formal significance is greater than its content. They intentionally dissolve the theme of *Thunderstorm* and use the shell of *Thunderstorm* to carry out a theatrical experiment in pursuit of formal innovation. Such a stage has a pioneering nature, but till now, these postmodern performances are only small experiments that will not last for a long time. There is a lack of reviews related to the pioneering versions of the performances of *Thunderstorm*.

In 2020, the Beijing Central China version of the serialized plays *Thunderstorm* and *Thunderstorm - After* premiered, directed by Frenchman Eike Lacascade. In *Thunderstorm*, the director downplayed the setting in the Republic of China and added more elements of modernity. The actors on stage are dressed in a modern Western style, no longer the long gowns, cheongsams, and short shirts characterized by the Republic of China in the 1920s. Similarly, the props and sets on stage were designed in a modern and minimalist style. The living room of the Zhou Mansion is decorated in off-white tones with marble patterned materials covering the walls and floors of the room, except three or four pieces of old furniture in classical Chinese style were specially preserved by Zhou Puyuan in remembrance of Mei Shiping [21]. This version of the *Thunderstorm* performance is a bold attempt

to cross cultures and generations. *Thunderstorm - After* is a second creation by Wan Fang, Cao Yu's daughter, inspired by the prologue and epilogue of *Thunderstorm*. It attempts to explore the life dilemmas of the elderly Zhou Puyuan, Fan Yi, and Lu Shiping to find a way out for them and to show the impermanence of fate and the dilemmas of existence. Nowadays, the performance of *Thunderstorm* continues to explore and innovate boldly.

4. Similarities and Differences

There are similarities between the themes of *Thunderstorm* performances during the Republican period and the period of reform and opening-up. The subject of *Thunderstorm* is closely related to the trend of times. Since the May Fourth Movement, enlightenment and rationality have been one of the ideological characteristics of the time. People broke through the shackles of the old feudal society. After ten years of turmoil during the Cultural Revolution, a new era of reform and opening up has begun in China. The period of reform and opening up is known as the "New Enlightenment Period." Both periods were deeply influenced by Western thought, which sought to subvert the dominant values of the past. During the period of reform and opening up, there was a slogan – "back to the starting line of the May Fourth Movement," so the performance of *Thunderstorm* also showed a certain tendency of "returning to the original intention." During these two periods, people discovered "human beings" in the performances of *Thunderstorm* and advocated the liberation of individuality and the recovery of human nature. The performance of *Thunderstorm* uncovers the arc of humanity in Zhou Puyuan, Fan Yi, and other characters. It provides a deeper understanding of the complexity and multi-faceted nature of them. The performances of *Thunderstorm* in these two periods show a diversified development. They both have a trend of popularization and entertainment. The market-oriented adaptation promotes the dissemination of *Thunderstorm*, but some of its contents are close to vulgarity. Although there are various versions of *Thunderstorm*, the principle of realism plays an important role in both periods.

History moves forward, and performances cannot be the same in two eras. During the Republican period, salvation and enlightenment were the two most important topics. Especially during the War of Resistance Against Japan, under the threat of national destruction, adapting social problem plays was always the mainstream mode. After the reform and opening up, Chinese comprehensive national power has risen. With the introduction of many philosophical trends, such as Western modernism, structuralism, and deconstructionism, people pay more attention to abstract thinking about philosophical concepts such as human nature, life, and fate [22]. Cao Yu's reference to the idea of *Thunderstorm* as a narrative poem is constantly emphasized and practiced on stage. Performances of *Thunderstorm* value the previously neglected prologue and epilogue. The prologue and epilogue are set in a church hospital. At the same time, chorus chants create a robust religious color, showing the cruelty of the universe and the irresistibility of fate. The experimental forms of *Thunderstorm* have been more varied, and the definition of *Thunderstorm* as fateful drama becomes more general and broader. The intense realism of anti-feudalism and class struggle was constantly downplayed. Adaptation of *Thunderstorm* is more like a modern expression of the heart.

5. Conclusion

There is no doubt that *Thunderstorm* is a prodigious work with rich and profound connotations. The thematic changes in *Thunderstorm* are closely related to the times. The play *Thunderstorm* has been transformed from Cao Yu's personal life creation into social issues through theatrical performances. The determination and exploration of the meaning and value of the play are no longer solely determined by Cao Yu's personal will. It is bound to be influenced by society. The charm of *Thunderstorm* calls people to figure out new interpretations of it constantly. It is a problem of dealing

with the relationship between the legend and the reality of the script of *Thunderstorm*. The director of every version of *Thunderstorm* has been thinking about it. In terms of the history of *Thunderstorm* performances, it is meaningful to conduct research on contemporary performances of *Thunderstorm*, delving deeper into the rich connotations of *Thunderstorm* themes in the future. The performance history of *Thunderstorm* has not ended and is still being written.

References

- [1] Zheng Shuyue. (2023) *Literature and Theater-the Two Poles of Drama*. *Journal of Literature and Theater*, 10, 44-46.
- [2] Zhou Fengqin. (2022) *On the Rise and Fall of "New Opera" and the Origin of "Civilized Opera"*. *Artistic Research*, 5, 133-142.
- [3] Chen Dabei. (1933) *On Civilized Theater*. *New Base Semi-Monthly*, Vol. 1, No. 2.
- [4] Yang Hansheng. (1985) *Selections from Yang Hansheng's Diary*. *Sichuan Literature and Art Publishing House*, Chengdu, p. 247.
- [5] Situ Ke. (1939) *Cao Yu's Trilogy and Its Performances – "Thunderstorm" "Sunrise" "Peking Man"*. *Chinese Literature and Art*, Vol. 1, No. 2.
- [6] Wu Tian. (1935) *The Performances of Thunderstorm*. *Miscellaneous Writings*, No. 2.
- [7] 14th edition of *Shen Bao*, January 10-12, 1936.
- [8] Chen Xi. (2013) *Thunderstorm: Unfinished Performance*. *Journal of Sun Yat-sen University (Social Sciences Edition)*, 53 (06), 54-62.
- [9] Cao Yu. (1935) *The Writing of Thunderstorm*. *Miscellaneous Writings*, No. 2.
- [10] Zheng Yimei. (1981) *Recollections of the Premiere of Thunderstorm in Nanjing*. *People's Drama*, No. 4.
- [11] Hou Kang. (2021) *The Chinese Drama Society and the First Complete Performance of Thunderstorm*. *Literary Studies*, 7, 248-255.
- [12] *The Capital's Public Performance of the Drama Thunderstorm*. *People's Daily*, July 3, 1954.
- [13] Tian Yingzhen. (1989) *Re-arranging Thunderstorm with new ideas*. *Beijing Evening News*, November 10, 1989.
- [14] Xia Chun. (2007) *Life Clears My Doubts for Me*. In: Liu Zhangchun. *The Stage Art of Thunderstorm*. *Chinese Drama Publishing House*, Beijing.
- [15] Wang Xiaoying. (1993) *Let Thunderstorm Enter a New World*. *Chinese Drama*, 5, 48-52.
- [16] Liu Meimei. (2004) *Further Discussion on Respecting Classics - Interview with Gu Wei*. *Beijing People's Art Theater*, February, 2004.
- [17] Hu Weimin. (1988) *Self-transcendence of Directing*. *Chinese Theater Press*, Beijing, p. 3.
- [18] Qiu Huanxing, Xu Anqi. (2020) *Prologue and Epilogue Deletion and the Acceptance Study of Thunderstorm*. *Drama Series of Nanjing University*, 2, 12-26.
- [19] Du Jinhua. (2012) *Thunderstorm 2.0: A New Wave Theater that Revolutionized Drama?*. *Modern Youth (Elite Edition)*, 8, 45.
- [20] Song Baozhen. (2015) *Theatrical Imagery and Staging of Thunderstorms*. In: Geng Faqi, Tian Benshang, Song Baozhen. *Eighty Years of Thunderstorm*. *Tianjin Ancient Books Publishing House*, Tianjin, 40-51.
- [21] Hu Minghua. (2021) *Exploration and Innovation in the Performance of Central China's Drama "Thunderstorm" and "Thunderstorm – After"*. *Oriental Art*, 2, 97-104.
- [22] Fu Lan, Li Yanwu. (2017) *Evolutionary Characteristics of Different Stage Performance Versions of the Play Thunderstorm*. *Contemporary Drama*, 4, 14-16.