

Chinese Influences on Modern and Contemporary European and American Literature and Literary Theories

Song of the Dark Ages: Brecht in Exile and “Chinese Role Model”

JIAN Nana
Southwest Jiaotong University
(China)

Abstract:

A close reading of the 20th-century German writer Brecht's works on Chinese elements, themes and subjects during his exile (1933-1947) shows that the “Chinese role model” had an important influence on Brecht's artistic creation and thinking about his life during his exile. The substance of Brecht's relationship with Chinese culture remains to be examined in depth. Using comparative literary methods such as figurative studies, this paper divides Brecht's references to Chinese culture into three specific ways: creative translations of the “exiled poet” Bai Juyi, imaginative manipulations of the “Chinese wise man” Lao Tzu, and the creation of *The Good Man of Sichuan*. Put the three together for investigation, we can not only see Brecht's courtesy to Chinese wisdom and recognition of Chinese culture, which is constantly developing and deepening. It could also be used as a mirror to further explore its underlying motivation, so as to see how Brecht completed his thinking of survival and art by learning from foreign oriental culture during his 15 years of exile life, which also represents the survival path of the German generation of exiles in that dark era.

Keywords: Bertolt Brecht, the dark ages, “Chinese role model”, Exile literature

1. Songs for a Dark Ages: Brecht and China in Exile

“In den finsternen Zeiten
Wird da auch gesungen werden?
Da wird auch gesungen werden.
Von den finsternen Zeiten”.
– Bertolt Brecht

This is a poem written by Brecht in 1939 when he was forced into exile in Denmark, fleeing persecution and massacre by the Nazis. The poem is from Brecht's *Deutsches Lied* in *Svendborger Gedichte* (1938-1941) (Brecht, 1967, p. 641), and the dark ages in the poem refers to the Nazi dictatorship in Germany (1933-1945). The rise to power of the Nazi dictatorship in 1933 was an unprecedented catastrophe for German culture, and German literary figures, artists and thinkers were the first to be expelled and persecuted by the Nazi dictator. When Brecht saw the violent rule of the Nazis in Germany, who oppressed and brutalised people, he chose to use the only tool he had, language, to fight against this inhuman rule: “It is precisely because of the rule of the dark ages that one must sing at the top of one's voice in order to oppose it” (Knop, 2018, p.392). For this reason, like his literary contemporaries, he had to go into exile to escape persecution by the Nazis. This article uses the term “songs of the dark ages” to refer to the artistic works Brecht produced during his exile in the dark ages, in order to better consider the connection between his literary work and the transformation of his life from the perspective of “exile and art”.

How to find a source of living water that never runs out of art in difficult times, to find the truth that people live together, Brecht chose to anchor his vision in the exotic East, in distant China. During his exile, he produced numerous literary and artistic works on Chinese elements and Chinese themes, such as the essays *Über die Malerei der Chinesen* (1934), *Über das traditionelle chinesische Drama* (1935), and *Verfremdungseffekte in der Chinesischen Schauspielkunst* (1936), which provides insight into how Brecht first developed an interest in Chinese traditional theatrical arts.

Revising translations of poetic works such as *Sechs chinesische Gedichte* (1938) and the long poem *Legende von der Entstehung des Buches Taoteking* (1938), as well as the plays *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder* (1939), *Gute Mensch von Sezuan* (prepared in 1930 and completed in 1942), *Der kaukasische Kreidekreis* (1944-1945) and others. In all of this, it is no wonder that the Korean scholar Song Yunyao claims that: “Brecht, as a playwright and poet, could be called the Chinese Brecht” (Brecht, 2015, p. 21).

The question is, why were all of Brecht's iconic artworks created in the dark ages? According to Jan Knopf, a German expert on Brecht, there is only one conclusion: “Brecht stole his artworks entirely from the troubled times” (Knopf, 2018, p. 428). And why was Brecht so fond of China in these dark times? There is more than one answer. Hans Mayer, a close friend of Brecht's, said of Brecht's relationship with Chinese poetry, “Brecht's later poetic output would have been unthinkable without a Chinese role model” (“chinesische Vorbild” ¹in Deutsch) (Mayer, 1971, p.131). The “chinesische Vorbild” to which Mayer refers primarily signifies the influence of the linguistic and meaningful aspects of Chinese poetry on Brecht's poetic artistry.

In fact, the “Chinese role model” for Brecht was not just a formal aspect of his poetry. A closer reading of the texts on Chinese elements that Brecht composed during his exile shows that the influence of the “Chinese role model” was deeply rooted in his poetry, drama and even his literary views, and that the connotation of the “Chinese role model” extended to Brecht's creative borrowing and absorption of Chinese culture and thought. This reference could be concretely demonstrated through the creative retranslation of the “exiled poet” Bai Juyi, the imagined “Chinese wise man” Lao Tzu, and the creation of *The Good Man of Sichuan*, which is informed by Chinese opera.

¹ The German noun “Vorbild” corresponds to the Chinese term, which can mean role model, exemplar, paragon, prototype, or blueprint. In this thesis, it is used in the sense of “role model”.

2. Creative retranslation: Achieving psychological resonance from Bai Juyi

In 1936, while in exile in London, Brecht decided to set up the exile magazine *das Wort* (*Words*), which was published in Moscow. In 1938, issue 8 of the journal published Brecht's *Sechs chinesische Gedichte* (Brecht, 1938) Brecht, who did not know Chinese, based his translation on the English translation of *170 Chinese Poems* (1918) by the British sinologist Arthur Waley (Waley, 1918, pp. 104-168).

These six Chinese poems are the first and only version of Brecht's Chinese poems to be published publicly during his exile.¹ Three of these six Chinese poems are from Bai Juyi (*Die Decke*, *Der Politiker*, and *Der Drache des schwarzen Pfuhls*), and if we look at the 12 Chinese poems that Brecht translated during his lifetime, seven are related to Bai Juyi. In 1950, Brecht published three more sets of Chinese poems in *Versuch*, Vol. 10, and said of Bai Juyi in preference: "His poetry is simple in wording but exceptionally careful and earnest" (Brecht, 1950, p. 10).

It would seem that of all the Chinese poets, Brecht was most fond of Bai Juyi. So what was Brecht's image of Bai Juyi? Why did Brecht translate a poet from exotic China during his exile?

In Brecht's translation, Bai Juyi is, firstly, an exile from the underclass, and secondly, his poetry is accessible in its content and form, which dares to satirise the times. It is clear from Brecht's translation that he did not follow Waley's English translation entirely; in his writing Bai Juyi was "born of a poor peasant family" and his poems were "sung in the mouths of peasants and horsemen", written in "on the walls of village schools, monasteries, and ship's

¹ The citations in this text are drawn from *Gesammelte Werke 9 Gedichte 2* published by Suhrkamp Verlag in Frankfurt in 1967, hereinafter abbreviated as "GW9". The original sources of the six Chinese poems are as follows: *Die Freunde* (GW9, p. 618); *Die Grosse Decke* (GW9, p. 618); *Der Politiker* (GW9, p. 619f); *Der Drache des schwarzen Pfuhls* (GW9, p. 620f.); *Ein Protest im sechsten Jahr des Chien Fu* (GW9, p. 621); *Bei der Geburt eines Sohnes* (GW9, p. 684f.)

cabins”, and “if tyrants and sycophants had heard his poems, they would have looked at him with disbelief and changed colour” (Brecht, 1967, p.424f). As can be seen, Brecht's particular emphasis on Bai Juyi's class status – from the lower classes and loved by them – is at odds with the description of Bai Juyi in Wiley's English translation: “his father was a second-class magistrate's assistant” (Waley, 1947, p. 105) and his poems were sung by “kings, princes, princesses, noblewomen, peasants and horsemen” (ibid.110-112). In this regard, Tan Yuan points out that:

Brecht is careful to create for his readers a great poet from the poor, always on the side of the oppressed and constantly criticising the ruling class, even going so far as to subtly manipulate the content of his biography (Tan Yuan, 2011, p. 106).

This artistic approach is closely related to Brecht's role as a “true socialist” – he was sympathetic to the underclass, concerned with social reality, and skilled in class analysis, which allowed Bai Juyi to enter Brecht's vision of translation and even rewriting.

In the poems *Die Grosse Decke* and *Der Drache des schwarzen Pfuhls*, Brecht emphasises Bai Juyi's political satire as a sympathy for the underclass and a bitter satire of the ruling class, respectively. The poem *Die Grosse Decke* is about Bai Juyi's wish, when he sees the frozen people in the city, for “Antwortet: Eine Decke, zehntausend Fußlang/ Die die ganzen Vorstädte einfach zudeckt” (Brecht,1967, p.618).

No doubt, Bai Juyi's wish to “shelter the cold people of the world” was in line with Brecht's state of mind during his exile, witnessing and suffering the cruel persecution of his countrymen by the Nazi totalitarian rulers. Brecht himself was a man who needed “a quilt to keep him warm”, but his concern for his country was evoked in Bai Juyi's poetry, and his humanitarianism was evident: even though he was persecuted and exiled, he wanted all the victims to be sheltered.

Brecht's focus on Bai Juyi as a “poet in exile” was mainly there for the spiritual resonance. In his poem *Ueber die Bezeichnung Emigranten* (1937), Brecht uses the word “exil” to describe himself

and his exile contemporaries: “We are in fact the deported, the exile” (Brecht, 1994, p. 81). His poems written in exile *Besuch bei den Verbannten Dichtern* (*Interviews with Exilic Poets*, 1938) speak of poets such as “Ovid, Voltaire, Heine Ovid, Voltaire, Heine, Bai Juyi and Du Fu” are among the famous “poets in exile” in the history of world literature (ibid. 35-36). Brecht saw himself as one of these great poets, expelled, uprooted from his homeland and forced into exile. From the ancient kingdom of poetry, China, Brecht saw that “Li Bai went into exile at least once, Du Fu at least twice, and Bai Juyi at least three times” (ibid. 455). The image of Bai Juyi as an “exile” is not only seen and repeated by Brecht, but for the exile Brecht is able to gain a spiritual and emotional bond with it, which in turn confirms that in the history of world literature, the only way for all great poets to find the the light for the future truth in the darkest of times is to go through exile.

3. Dare to imagine:

Pursuing spiritual transcendence from Lao Tzu

Although Brecht's exposure to Chinese culture first began with poetry and was so fond of the “exiled poet” Bai Juyi, he was “most interested in Chinese culture, especially Taoism” (Zhan Xianghong & Zhang Chengquan, 2016, p. 333). Already in 1925, before his exile, Brecht had shown an interest in Lao Tzu, the founder of the Taoist doctrine. He had already briefly described the story of Lao Tzu's writing of the *Tao Te Ching* in *Die höflichen Chinesen*. In 1938, while living in exile in Denmark, Brecht again wrote a narrative poem directly named after Lao Tzu, *Legende von der Entstehung des Buches Taoteking*, which is one of the best known entries in his exile poetry collection, *The Svendborg Poems*. In the poem, Brecht refers to Lao Tzu as “the old man”, “the wise man” and “the master”, emphasising firstly that Lao Tzu was a Chinese wise man with an open mind, and secondly, giving a specific account of the reason for the wise man's departure: “The

Master was forced to stay away from the hustle and bustle. Because goodness in the state has returned to decline and evil has returned” (Wei Maoping & Ma Jiabin, 2002, p. 283-285). It is clear that the wise man was forced to stay away from exile because of the poor state of society. And the life of this wise man in exile was very difficult: “The old man was barefoot and dressed in torn clothes. There was only one wrinkle on his forehead, and it seemed that success had not taken care of him” (ibid.). These descriptions are largely consistent with the archetypal story of Lao Tzu's journey west from the Hangu Pass, and this rewriting suggests that Lao Tzu has officially entered the textual vision of Brecht's exile.

Brecht turned this short story into a narrative poem in the form of a question and answer session, and added a cow and a child servant as a surrogate for Lao Tzu (Wei Maoping & Chen Hongyan, 2015, p. 157). However, on his way out of the Pass, Lao Tzu took with him a “pipe” and “white bread”, both of which were European specialties. One could dare to speculate that perhaps Brecht in exile was the very image of the “white bread entrance” and “pipe in hand”, after all his 1940 book *In Exile* mentions “a box with smoking utensils and brass ashtrays. / Draped with a Chinese scroll painting of a ‘sceptic’” (Brecht, 1987, p. 194), which, as such, is rather like a self-portrait of Brecht: like Lao Tzu, he was forced to leave his homeland and walk in exile, often in the same difficult circumstances.

In this imagination and processing, Brecht also realizes that Lao Tzu, a wise man once revered in China, would also go into exile, and thus finally chose to “move around the black pine and go into the deep mountains”. There is no doubt that “reclusion” was the final destination of Lao Tzu's life, and Brecht did not rewrite it, suggesting that he was in agreement with Lao Tzu's final choice. As 1938 was the most difficult period of Brecht's exile, the re-entry of Lao Tzu into Brecht's vision at this time undoubtedly has an important meaning of spiritual self-help and inner transcendence: deep in the lowest valley of the dark times, why would Brecht not want to “escape from the world” like the wise Lao Tzu in order to achieve self-transcendence? Thus, in another of Brecht's poems in

exile, *Poems and Songs*, he writes a poem entitled *An die Nachgeborenen* (1938): “Ich wäre gerne auch weise./ In den alten Büchern steht, was weise ist:/ Sich aus dem Streit der Welt halten und die kurze Zeit/ Ohne Furcht verbringen/ Auch ohne Gewalt auskommen/ Böses mit Gutem vergelten” (Brecht, 1967, p. 723). The “alten Büchern” (ancient book), “Sich aus dem Streit der Welt halten und die kurze Zeit” (free from the world) and “Ohne Furcht verbringen” (living a life free from fear) here seem to correspond to a reference to the *Tao Te Ching* and the idea of “inner transcendence”.

The life experiences and attitudes of the Chinese wise man Lao Tzu brought Brecht a new kind of inspiration. Unlike the psychological resonance and inspiration he received from Bai Juyi at the beginning of his exile, this is a spiritual revelation of self-transcendence that Brecht received from the wise Lao Tzu during the most difficult period of his exile. In the *Tao Te Ching*, Lao Tzu considers the Tao to be the origin of the world. And if one wants to escape from the distractions of this reality and return to one's origin, one can find inspiration in Lao Tzu. This is why Adolf Reichwein (a German sociologist who was a persecuted exile at the same time) pointed out that:

The Tao Te Ching thus becomes a bridge to the East for modern man. who now, after all the noise of this mechanical world, needs to return to his origin, and Lao Tzu taught him to overcome the superficial world in the Tao. The cry for a return to the origin of life in our time has an answer there (Reichwein, 1923, pp. 9-10).

4. Let go experiment: seeking inspiration for “Verfremdung” from Chinese opera

The Good Man of Sichuan is a creative experiment by the exiled Brecht in his theory of “Verfremdung”(defamiliarization or alienation), and a renewed attempt to assimilate Chinese culture.

Knopf argues it is because “the allegorical form of *The Good Man of Sichuan*, which is not commonly understood, may offer the possibility of an experiment in letting go” (Knopf, 2018, p. 393). Brecht himself notes in a small quote after the play, “*The Good Man of Sichuan* is the twenty-seventh attempt” (Brecht, 1985, p. 153). The Chinese elements embodied in the play are evident not only in the arrangement of characters and locations, but also in its clever borrowing of the artistic techniques and performance forms of traditional Chinese opera.

Firstly, in terms of form, *The Good Man of Sichuan* draws on the “wedges” of Yuan opera. Old Wang, a water seller, who assumes the role of “wedge”: to introduce the main text or to supplement it. Wang opens with a full page and a half of “monologues” in which he introduces himself:

I'm a water seller in Sichuan province. It's a tough job for me! When there is a shortage of water, I have to go far and wide to collect it, and when there is no shortage of water, I can't earn a penny. Besides, our ‘Land of Heaven’ is too poor and too miserable (Brecht, 1985, p. 3).

The opening monologue of *The Good Man of Sichuan* draws on the Chinese Yuan opera's technique of “announcing oneself”, in which Lao Wang gives a brief account of his identity as a water seller who has descended to Sichuan in search of a good man. Whereas in traditional Western drama the identity and experiences of the characters are mainly presented through dialogue and the development of the plot itself, Chinese opera characters often “announce themselves” when they appear on stage, introducing their identity and background and recounting the “antecedents” to the plot of the play. Therefore, Yu Kuangfu points out that: “this is a prominent narrative feature of Chinese opera, and it is also commonly used in Brecht's plays” (Yu Kuang-fu, 2001, p. 267).

Secondly, Brecht often includes singing in the body of his plays. “Singing is an important part of the art of Chinese opera, so Chinese opera consists of a strong lyricism” (Zhang Li, 2004, p. 124). For example, in the third section, “Evening in the Park”, when Shen

De and Yang Xun are on a date in the rain, the author instead arranges the old Wang, the water seller, who sings a song; The Song of the Water Seller in the Rain: “I’m selling water today, the rain is pouring down; to sell some water, I’m running down a long street, now I’m shouting: “I’m selling water! But no one cares and no one buys the water by drinking and drinking” (Brecht, 1985, p. 49).

The inclusion of these songs not only adds to the lyricism of the play, but also tends to “loosen” the structure of the play, as Brecht’s ultimate aim is to break the Aristotelian emotion “Einfühlung”, in favour of the “Verfremdung” of emotion, and thus to realise his “Epische Theater” in order to distinguish it from the Aristotelian “Dramatisches Theater”.

Finally, one of Brecht’s most significant references to Chinese opera in *The Good Man of Sichuan* is his ingenious use of the “mask” prop and his use of the female character Shen De as a woman dressed as a man to move the story forward. In the play, Brecht arranges for Shen De to play two roles, being Shen De when she is the good guy, and wearing a mask when she becomes her evil cousin Cui Da: “Shen De comes out with Cui Da’s mask and clothes in her hand and sings ‘It’s hard to fight a good man who is a god...’” (Brecht, 1985, p. 65).

Shen De changes her clothes and “dresses up as a man” to become Cui Da. It is particularly like the creative appropriation of the theatrical performance technique he had seen in the Soviet Union, where the master Mei Lanfang changed his clothes and make-up to become a “man dressed as a woman”. It is no wonder that Brecht’s wife, Helen Weigel, said: “The blood of Chinese art is in Brecht’s theatre” (Brecht, 1990, p. 9).

Of course, Brecht found useful elements in Chinese opera and performance forms for his theory of “Verfremdung” and “Epische Theater”, and therefore experimented with plays containing Chinese elements, such as *The Good Man of Sichuan*, which were not essentially Brecht had a Chinese complex, as he once said: “It is not easy to recognize the effect of defamiliarization in Chinese opera as a moveable technique” (Brecht, 1990, p. 198). Thus, for Brecht Chinese opera is only his way of achieving the “Verfremdungseffekte”(defamiliarization-effect), breaking the illusion of the tradi-

tional theatre stage, breaking the emotional resonance of the audience, and thus provoking them to think and reflect on real life as a valuable form of theatre creation to draw on.

Conclusion

While Brecht drew on the ideology and culture of his “Chinese role models”, he also continued to reflect on his own experience of exile, and one might even say that the two were essentially isomorphic. In the early days of his exile, Brecht was inspired by his creative retranslation of the exiled poet Bai Juyi and was brave enough to engage in social reflection and criticism. In the darkest moments of his exile, when the Nazi forces in Germany were becoming more and more rampant, Brecht was able to save himself spiritually and achieve inner transcendence through his imagination and processing of the wise man Lao Tzu. The final publication of *The Good Man of Sichuan*, after fleeing four countries, shows that Brecht's reference to “Chinese role models” has shifted boldly from individual characters to the art of Chinese opera. As a theatrical experiment based entirely on Chinese settings, characters, places and even forms, Brecht was not motivated by a particular Chinese complex, but rather in the service of his theatre theory of “defamiliarization” and in the service of German society at the time.

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