

Classic Deconstruction: The Artistic Features of Avant-garde Drama Old Tales Retold

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Abstract: "Old Tales Retold" is a collection of Lu Xun's classic short stories, which was adapted into a drama by pioneering director Lin Zhaohua in 2000. Both of them provide deconstructive explanations and breakthroughs in the content and form of traditional novels and traditional dramas. This article attempts to analyze the content and form of the novel and the avant-garde drama "Old Tales Retold" from the perspective of postmodern drama, combining the artistic characteristics of the two works. Formal deconstruction strategies.

Keywords: Avant-garde Drama; Lu Xun; Old Tales Retold; Lin Zhaohua

1. Introduction

Old Tales Retold is a collection of short stories by Lu Xun, which includes eight short stories: Repairing the Sky, Forging the Sword, Reviving the Dead, Non-Aggression, Leaving the Pass), Rationalizing Water, Picking Wisteria, and Running Toward the Moon) Each story stands alone as an individual chapter, but they share a unified overall style marked by a distinctive and light-hearted humor.

Lu Xun employs a facetious and satirical narrative approach to systematically deconstruct conventional themes and historical personages throughout these narratives. He adeptly employs the modern fictional genre to establish a nexus between established traditions and the contemporary intellectual and existential quandaries encountered by modern individuals. Within this body of work, Lu Xun also undertakes a profound contemplation of the notion of the 'national character' of the Chinese populace. Spanning over a decade, this corpus of work is noteworthy for including five short stories that emanated from the latter part of Lu Xun's literary career, thus denoting a culmination of his creative prowess during his later years.

In the year 2000, the renowned avant-garde director Lin Zhaohua adapted Mr. Lu Xun's classic work, Old Tales Retold, into a theatrical production. Lin Zhaohua's adaptation of Old Tales Retold was a collaborative effort involving three entities: the Central Experimental Drama Theater, Lin Zhaohua Drama Studio, and the Japanese theatrical group, People's Theater Company. Lin Zhaohua served as the chief director, while Yi Liming held dual roles as director and scenic designer.^[1] Remaining true to the avant-garde spirit of Lu Xun's modern literary creations, Lin Zhaohua embarked on an audacious exploration during the process of transforming written text into a theatrical presentation. First and foremost, he transcended the confines of conventional theater spaces by staging the production in an abandoned factory. Furthermore, he eliminated ticket sales, offering the performance to the audience entirely free of charge, with the aim of eschewing any commercial undertones and conducting an experimental exploration within the realm of avant-garde theater. Through the transformation of this renowned work by Lu Xun into a theatrical performance, Lin Zhaohua accomplished a deconstruction of classical literary text. This deconstructive approach aligns with the pioneering and deconstructive characteristics of postmodern theater.

2. Postmodern Drama and Avant-garde Drama Old Tales Retold

Postmodernism emerged in the mid-20th century, particularly during the 1950s and 1960s, and flourished through the 1970s and 1980s, sparking strong reactions within the academic circles of Europe and the United States. Postmodernism can be understood as a theoretical encapsulation of the forms of postmodern society and its cultural manifestations. Prominent figures associated with

postmodernism include theorists such as Jean Baudrillard, Jean-François Lyotard, and David Harvey. Postmodernism advocates rebellion and deconstruction, pushing for radical reforms in literature and art. As described by Hassan, it embodies the trait of inner uncertainty. Postmodernism carries a profound spirit of deconstruction, challenging tradition and the classical, while endorsing diversity, uncertainty, and multiplicity.

Postmodernism is a suspended signifier, seemingly challenging a comprehensive description through concrete language. Some scholars of theater view the development of modernist art in the period surrounding World War I and after as the precursor to modernist drama. Meanwhile, they regard the era following World War II, influenced by experimental art, as the stage for the development of postmodernist drama. Postmodernist drama thrived during the 1960s, guided by theories such as "cruel drama" and "simple drama." Its theoretical framework encompasses deconstruction, uncertainty, and anti-authoritarianism. It advocates for the use of "non-language" and "non-script," emphasizing the actor's personal performance as the artistic core. Material language is emphasized as a potent means of theatrical expression, and it underscores that performance must be achieved through interaction with the audience.[2]

The theatrical production "Old Tales Retold," directed by Lin Zhaohua, was adapted and staged in the year 2000. Lin Zhaohua, often referred to as the "Grand Director," is one of the most influential and simultaneously controversial directors in contemporary Chinese theater. Over the course of his extensive 40-plus-year career in directing, he has overseen more than 80 stage productions, spanning various genres such as drama, traditional Chinese opera, and opera. Many of his works have become significant representative pieces at different stages of China's theatrical development since the modern era, leaving an indelible mark on contemporary Chinese theater history.

Lin Zhaohua's directorial achievement "Absolute Signal" is regarded as a seminal work in China's small theater movement and marked him as one of China's pioneering directors in avant-garde theater. Throughout his career in theater, Lin Zhaohua has been deeply influenced by postmodernist theater concepts, including Antonin Artaud's "cruel drama" theory. Artaud, in his 1938 publication "The Theater and Its Double," proposed the concept of cruel drama, advocating for the liberation of human nature, the abandonment of traditional narrative conventions in theater, and the redirection of the audience's attention towards the actions on stage itself.

This philosophical underpinning finds continuity in Lin Zhaohua's adaptation and staging of Old Tales Retold. In this production, actors no longer adhere to fixed positions as seen in traditional theater. They engage in dialogues, sing intermittently using traditional opera vocal techniques, and their movements no longer strictly align with language. The inclusion of light and agile dance sequences, as well as a sword-fighting scene in Forging the Sword, is imbued with a sense of liberated performance. Notably, the production lacks a scripted text. Instead, Lin Zhaohua encourages actors to read the stories themselves and experiment with various forms of bodily expression, linguistic modes, and vocalizations to convey their personal experiences. These experiences encompass memories, fantasies, realities, irrationalities, and irregularities. The director selectively incorporates these elements derived from the actors' daily practice into the final stage presentation, forming an unconventional and dynamic theatrical expression.[3]

3. Consistency in Textual Content: Manifestation of Class Issues

If Lu Xun's "Old Tales Retold" is a form of deconstruction and re-creation of traditional culture through modern fiction, then Lin Zhaohua's theatrical adaptation of "Old Tales Retold" inherits the same spirit. It is a deconstruction and rewriting of this classic work by a master that dates back to the May Fourth New Literature Movement. In both the novel "Old Tales Retold" and the theatrical adaptation, the two creators deconstruct the original text in different ways to achieve their expressive purposes. They operate within different historical and cultural contexts, but both discuss class issues.

Lu Xun's era in China was characterized by a semi-feudal and semi-colonial society, with the working class in the midst of growth and development as an emerging class. In the year 2000, when Lin Zhaohua reinterpreted "Old Tales Retold," China was at the turn of the millennium, and the working class was grappling with the aftermath of state-owned enterprise reforms. The next analysis will use the chapter "Forging the Sword" as an example, primarily due to the director Lin Zhaohua's choice of this particular chapter for his theatrical adaptation of "Old Tales Retold." Furthermore, compared to other works in "Old Tales Retold", "Forging the Sword" exhibits fewer ambiguous elements. Even Lu Xun himself admitted in a letter to a friend that "Forging the Sword" was one of his

more serious works.

"Forging the Sword" tells the story of a blacksmith named Yao Bang who helps a young boy, Mei Jianchi, seek revenge for his father's murder. Lu Xun first reconstructs the value connotations of the classic "Gan Jiang Mo Ye" from the perspectives of revenge, resistance, and revolution. Throughout Lu Xun's literary works, revenge is a significant theme. Revenge is a classic theme in both Chinese and Western literature and has been a central motif in tragic dramas from "Oedipus Rex" to "The Revenger's Tragedy." Returning to the text of "Forging the Sword," Yao Bang and Mei Jianchi achieve a dual form of revenge—both in action, by assassinating the tyrant, and in spirit, by seeking revenge on the audience. This is similar to the description in "Dead Fire": "I was finally crushed under the wheels, but I had time to see the chariot plunge into the icy ravine." However, Lu Xun goes beyond exploring the theme of revenge and employs a satirical approach to deconstruct the very act of revenge itself in the end.[4]

Moving from the bloodshed of revenge, Lu Xun's narrative extends into the realms of resistance and revolution. While Mei Jianchi and Yao Bang initially pursue distinct objectives, their paths converge in a remarkable manner. In this narrative, Lu Xun juxtaposes vengeance and resistance, portraying the collaborative efforts of the two protagonists as pivotal to their success. By skillfully interchanging the themes of "resistance" and "revenge," Lu Xun prompts a deeper reflection: these two concepts, though distinct, share a common spiritual core. Revenge often necessitates resistance as a precursor, yet the two are not always synonymous. [4]Lu Xun's exploration of this thematic interplay highlights the nuanced relationship between resistance and revenge, revealing the intricate dynamics at play.

Transitioning from resistance and revenge, Lu Xun further delves into the conflicts and contradictions inherent in class struggle. Within this context, Lu Xun embarks on a rewriting endeavor, legitimizing Mei Jianchi's act of revenge. He dispenses with the subplot of concealed sentiments found in the original narrative, instead attributing Mei Jianchi's father's demise to the violence and suspicion of the imperial ruler. In the intellectual climate of the New Culture Movement, Lu Xun imbues the revenge plotline with class dynamics, critiquing the emperor's violence and oppression. This reinterpretation undoubtedly underscores the legitimacy of revenge, marking a significant departure from the original narrative. In sum, "Forging the Sword" primarily follows the threads of revenge, resistance, and revolution, deconstructing the traditional narrative of "Gan Jiang Mo Ye" and imbuing it with new significance within the context of the New Culture Movement.

In Lin Zhaohua's theatrical adaptation of "Old Tales Retold," the director similarly engages in content deconstruction. Gone are the conventional scripts of traditional theater; instead, actors are granted the freedom to interpret the text through their actions. Lin Zhaohua himself acknowledges this approach, stating, "I dislike rehearsing based on scripts," and "I build my own concepts through other people's scripts, express my own thoughts. I lack the ability to write original scripts; my interest lies solely in directing." [5]He goes on to explain that he often diminishes the narrative and characters in a script and abstracts what he desires. Concurrently, the content narrows down to a single throughline, centered around "Forging the Sword," complemented by inserts from other chapters. The core narrative becomes less defined, inviting the audience to closely observe the actors' movements and dialogues. Leveraging the backdrop of the stage and the image of a working-class collective, Lin Zhaohua crafts a contemporary tableau of the working class. In a scriptless play, all events become challenging to interpret or emotionally direct, leaving the audience primarily with the abandoned factory setting and the performers in workers' attire. This portrayal resonates with the era, mirroring the class struggles examined in Lu Xun's original work as society, much like the abandoned factory and machinery, inches towards a slow denouement.

4. Deconstructing Form: The Postmodern Essence of "Old Tales Retold"

Both the novel and the theatrical adaptation of "Old Tales Retold" break new ground in their creative forms, deconstructing traditional modes of storytelling. Lu Xun was always a pioneer in innovating the novel's creative modes, even in the final years of his life, maintaining exceptional creativity and magnificent imagination. Works like "Out of the Pass," "Li Shui," "Non-Aggression," "Picking Weeds," and "Revival" within "Old Tales Retold" represent his innovative and unique impact on the established narrative paradigm set by "A Call to Arms" and "Wandering." [6]

For instance, in his distinctive choice of themes, Lu Xun didn't adhere to a binary opposition of "ancient vs. modern." There were no clear boundaries in his language; the ancient and modern coexisted. Characters were figures from familiar ancient legends, and the plot and dialogue resembled

passages from traditional culture. However, the thinking and vocabulary were imbued with a modern sensibility, featuring elements like policemen and English greetings. Lu Xun not only "revised" stories but also placed the cultural mindset of China's traditional myths within the contemporary context, subjecting it to critique and reflection. Lu Xun's works hold high literary value, marked by their critical and revolutionary aspects, which align with the mainstream revolutionary discourse since the founding of the People's Republic of China. As a result, they have become hotspots for adaptation into film and television.

Due to the classic nature of Lu Xun's works, the challenge lies in how to adapt them appropriately and effectively. The greatest difficulty in adapting Lu Xun's novels for the stage lies in translating the complex, nuanced psychological characterizations and the profound narratives or commentaries of the narrator into tangible stage representations. For adaptors, these aspects directly impact the key expression of Lu Xun's profound ideas.[7]

Lin Zhaohua's choice to adapt "Old Tales Retold" not only had to consider the significance of Lu Xun's original work but also had to reflect his own distinctive style. For Lin Zhaohua, such themes and adaptation approaches were not entirely new. In his previous adaptations of classic works like "The Orphan of Zhao" and "Peking Man," he had already attempted to breathe new life into these classics through avant-garde theater. When adapting Lu Xun's works, Lin Zhaohua's primary task was to uphold the spiritual banner of Lu Xun's writing. Just as Lu Xun bore the historical mission of revolutionizing the modern novel-writing style during his time, Lin Zhaohua's theatrical creations consistently emphasized avant-garde creativity. In his theatrical works, he also demonstrated a penchant for deconstructing and breaking free from traditional theatrical forms.

This breakthrough is evident in his choice of "stage." Lin Zhaohua decided to abandon the conventional theatrical stage and set it in an abandoned factory, specifically a coal mine. The juxtaposition of modern machinery and clothing from the Republican era created a scenic landscape representing Chinese society. This unconventional stage design blended elements from Lu Xun's era and incorporated complex presentation forms, including image projections. It created three distinct performance spaces on the stage, even featuring aerial performance spaces above the ground, achieving a multi-dimensional parallel presentation. This experimental approach, termed "environmental theater," aimed to break the rigid rules of traditional theaters and proscenium stages.[8] It emphasized audience participation, redefined the relationship between the audience and the performance, and established a new theatrical space.

In "Old Tales Retold," Lin Zhaohua dissolved the distance between the audience and the theatrical stage. The audience was no longer passive observers but active participants in the creation. In "Watching the Play Program," author Hang Cheng, who witnessed a live performance of "Old Tales Retold," humorously shared his unique experience of watching the show in this unconventional setting: "Have you ever watched a play sitting in a factory building? Have you ever watched a play while sitting on a pile of coal? There were three coal-making machines in front of you... After watching the play, your nose and ears are covered in black..." [9] In such a special environment, the audience and the theater blended seamlessly, vividly embodying the deconstructive essence of postmodernism. Actors roasted real sweet potatoes on stage, gathered around, ate, and narrated stories. They alternated between performing and taking on the roles of the audience. The live audience members also engaged in reflection in this unique environment, experiencing the allure of postmodern theater.

Simultaneously, Lin Zhaohua attempted to explore cross-media experimentation by incorporating video projections into live performances, breaking the boundaries between image and theater. In my participation in the 2021 Ananya Theatre Festival experimental production "Metamorphosis," directed by Li Jianjun, a similar approach was employed. Even two decades later, such methods can still be considered experimental, let alone the bold attempts made by Lin Zhaohua at the turn of the millennium. This type of experimentation, which began with "Old Tales Retold," gradually became a characteristic feature of Lin Zhaohua's avant-garde theater style.

At the "2014 Lin Zhaohua Theatre Invitation Exhibition," the production "Miss Julie" attracted the attention of numerous spectators by combining traditional forms with visual imagery. In this approach, actors performed live while recordings were made simultaneously, and the visuals were created on the spot. Such avant-garde experiments can be traced back to their origins in "Old Tales Retold." Through these diverse experiments, Lin Zhaohua deconstructed traditional theatrical forms, offering Chinese contemporary theater stages and performances greater possibilities and a glimpse into the future. He refreshed the understanding of theater for the first generation of modern theater audiences in China. This undeniable contribution to Chinese stage arts has opened new avenues for the country's theatrical

creativity.

In the realm of artistic exploration by Lin Zhaohua, there have been both praise and criticism from the artistic community, critics, and the audience. However, in "Old Tales Retold," Lin Zhaohua inherited the avant-garde spirit of Mr. Lu Xun. He boldly deconstructed classic literary texts with innovative interpretations, not through mere imitation but by reevaluating them in the context of the contemporary era. Influenced by postmodern theater theories, Lin Zhaohua put his creative philosophy into practice in "Old Tales Retold," subverting tradition with avant-garde flair and presenting literary classics in novel forms. This approach invites the audience to engage in endless contemplation and aesthetic experiences.

5. Conclusion

By combining Lu Xun's literary works with the aesthetics of postmodern and avant-garde theater, Lin Zhaohua's adaptation of "Old Tales Retold" highlights the diversity and complexity of theater. It is not only a reinterpretation of classic literature but also a rethinking of theatrical form and an exploration of audience engagement and immersive experiences. This adaptation brings together various artistic elements, serving as an intriguing case where postmodern and avant-garde theater blend harmoniously. It also provides new perspectives and insights for the future development of theater.

Even today, the interpretation of "Old Tales Retold" remains an open question. Perhaps, Lin Zhaohua has provided us with an answer—an exploration of the courage required for deconstruction and re-creation of tradition. "Old Tales Retold" offers subsequent generations valuable food for thought and artistic wealth.

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