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Dramatizing Ideology: Socialist Realism and Nostalgic Sentiment in Post-1949 Chinese Dramas

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Abstract

Modern Chinese drama includes huaju and adapted xiqu, shaped by twentieth-century sociopolitical developments and influences. Among all literary genres, drama is most closely connected to everyday life, and Chinese political drama emerged directly within the urban context shaped by modernity. Lao She's Teahouse stands out as a landmark achievement in Chinese theatrical art since the founding of the People's Republic of China, often hailed as a pinnacle of modern drama. With its vivid portrayal of Beijing life across several historical periods and its unique artistic style, the play has secured a lasting place in the history of Chinese theater. This paper uses the Teahouse as a case study to explore the artistic features that define it within the framework of modern drama theory. The Dragon Beard Ditch is an optimistic socialist realism through space, time, and ideological tension. It enriches the use of the historical context to explore the dramatic ideology of post-49 Chinese dramas. Through a close analysis of its structure, characters, and thematic elements, the paper aims to uncover the artistic value of the work and its contribution to the development of modern Chinese drama. By doing so, it seeks to offer insights and potential reference points for future artistic exploration and peak construction in the field of contemporary Chinese theater.

Keywords: Chronotope, dramaturgy, ideology, nostalgia, revolution

Introduction

Modern Chinese drama is a broad term encircling multiple theatrical forms that developed in twentieth-century China. It comprises huaju (spoken drama), a Western-style theatrical genre developed around the turn of the century, as well as modern versions of traditional xiqu

(Chinese opera), such as Peking Opera and kunqu. Shiao-ling Yu (2013) claims, "Chinese spoken drama (huaju) has been closely linked to the social and political conditions of the country ever since its introduction around 1919" (p. 90). These modern forms also often integrate dramatic adaptations of artistic works, particularly novels and short stories, and create a dynamic, hybrid theatrical space to reproduce both national traditions and global influences. Chinese dramas formed during the early People's Republic of China (PRC), from 1949 to 1966, the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, were intensely formed by Marxist artistic policies. Weijie Song (2019) views, "…in the early stage of socialist China, various issues of aesthetics and politics, new and old, called for timely ideas, politicized approaches and artistic practices, which stimulated discussions among dramatists and contributed to the booming of dramatic productions in the period" (p. 410). This period perceived an incomparable position of theatrical production with state ideology i.e. socialist realism. Performative dramas created during this era were cultural artifacts and political instruments for consolidating Maoist principles of revolution, class struggle, and proletarian morality.

Chen (2017) has pointed out, drama in China primarily adhered to the notion that literature and the arts must serve the interests of the workers, peasants, and soldiers. The political function of theatre was dominant, and Zicheng (2007) advocates in History of Contemporary Chinese Literature that post-1949 drama underlined the intimate connection between the stage, politics, and society. Despite limitations on creative autonomy, many dramatists—both recognized veterans and evolving young writers—encompassed cultural policy with eagerness. The dramatists Guo Moruo, Lao She, Cao Yu, Tian Han, and Chen Baichen led the charge in aligning theatre with the socialist agenda. A younger generation of playwrights, including Hu Ke, Wang Lian, Shi Chao, and Du Yin, appeared to carry forward the ideological mission with different energy and innovative approaches. Curtin (2007) states, "What globalization theorists have failed to produce is a persuasive account of the most significant forces driving these processes and a clear explanation of why some places become centers of cultural production and therefore tend to be more influential in shaping the emerging global system" (p. 9). The dramatists worked to strengthen the Chinese revolution and globalize Chinese literature. By the early 1960s, especially with the onset of preparations for the Cultural Revolution, theatre became the most immediate and effective medium for articulating political zeal and ideological commitment. Mackerras (1990) accepts, "With liberation, the policies which had been laid down by Mao Zedong at the Yan'an Forum in May 1942 became the guidelines for literature and arts throughout the country" (p. 149). After 1949, China saw a cultural revitalization that extended to theater. Many nearly extinct regional dramas regained popularity and creativity. A new trend of representing socialist realism emerged, including those from minority nationalities, enriching the nation's artistic and theatrical heritage. Szatkowski (2013) perceives that dramaturgical theory explores how communication and observation replace causality and predictability in understanding dramatic art. It observes

society and conveys meaning, how it recognizes art, and communicates change.

This paper contextualizes the historical sequences of post-49 dramas to examine the past and enhance the reconstruction of a historical context of dramas. Benford and Hare (2021) view dramaturgical analysis, "… illuminates how people derive shared understandings and collaboratively construct reality in everyday, cultural, organizational, and institutional life" (p. 646). It enriches the use of the historical setting to link historical phenomena and post-49 socialist reality. Historical contextualization confers "…a temporal sense of difference that includes deep understanding of the social, political, and cultural norms of the time period under investigation as well as knowledge of the events leading up to the historical situation and other relevant events…" (p. 43). It offers an overview of the dramatic landscape by examining how the creation of dramas and performance represented class struggle, equality, gender roles, and revolutionary passion. It also explores how historical dramas reinterpreted the past through the lens of class consciousness of post-1949 society. Finally, it presents an engrossed discussion of Lao She's Dragon Beard Ditch and Teahouse, and highlights their dual function as both examples of and exceptions to the ideological firmness of drama. Lao She's dramas vividly represented Beijing, capturing the everyday lives of people during the late Qing Dynasty (1901–1912), the Republic of China era (1912–1949), and the first phase of the People's Republic of China. His dramas concentrated on Marxist aesthetic ideology and class struggle and embellished the seminal part of historical contextualization. In this framework, the past was not static; it was a pliable resource that could be reconstructed and repurposed to validate socialist ideals and criticize old social structures.

Reviewing the New Society and Revolution

The transformation from the Nationalist-controlled Republic of China to the newly established People's Republic of China (PRC) pleaded for innovative narratives to apprehend the profound social and political shift. Playwrights produced works to rejoice the new working classes and address socialist goals. Rawnsley and Rawnsley (2010) observe, "The story of China's encounter with globalization is increasingly familiar: against the backdrop of comprehensive economic and social transformation, the People's Republic of China is enjoying unprecedented rates of economic growth" (p. 1). The depiction of the enemy by Mao, "Who are our friends, and who are our enemies? This is the utmost important question for our revolution" (p. 1). This ideological perception led to a proliferation of theatres centered on workers, farmers, and soldiers, figures preserved as the vanguard of the revolutionary foundation. In Facing New Things (1951) by Du Yin, Liu Xiangru, and Hu Ling, the class conflict in a northeast steel factory advocates for the move of industrial labor under socialism. Xia Yan's The Test (1954) assesses bureaucratic inertia and praises revolutionary zeal in China's eastern part. Similarly, Sun Yu's Women's Representative (1951) depicts a female cadre's efforts to redefine family and workplace roles in the countryside, linking gender liberation with class advancement. Mackerras (2008)

remarks, "The Chinese theatre over the past hundred years… includes a role for drama in society that is highly politicized and drama aimed at affecting society as a whole… Nationalism was one of the most important forces in republican China" (p. 2-3). As this, dramas after post-49 served to promote revolutionary themes.

Land reform, a central pillar of Chinese policy, was dramatized in An Bo's Spring Wind Comes to Nuomin River (1954), and Cao Yu's Bright Skies (1954) spoke of the ideological conversion of intellectuals at a medical college. Hu Ke's Growing Up in Battle (1949) surveys a young boy's path from rural hardship to revolutionary valor. Chen Qitong's Myriad Rivers and Mountains (1954) elaborates the Long March and the formation of a radical spirit. However, as scholar Siyuan Liu notes, many of these works experienced rigid thematic formulas. The Worker plays illustrated the ideological conflict between progressive and regressive characters; peasant plays represented on collective farming; and army plays performed victories over enemies. Zicheng (2007) talks about the political agency of dramas in this historical period, "Beginning in 1963, during the preparation for and the initiation of the Cultural Revolution, of all the arts the theatre, including western-style drama, was seen as the art form best suited to the direct expression of political enthusiasm and imagination" (p. 190). In contrast, a 'Fourth Type' of drama sought to push thematic boundaries. Hai Mo's The Vertical Flute is Played Horizontally (1956) critiques rural bureaucracy, and Yang Lüfang's The Cuckoo Sings Again (1957) champions young model workers defying feudal customs. These plays revealed the dark complexities of life in socialist China, including moral dilemmas, disillusionment, and bureaucratic failure.

In the 1960s, urban socialist realism became prominent. Shen Ximeng's Sentinel under the Neon Lights (1963), Chen Yun's The Young Generation (1963), and Cong Shen's Never Forget (1964) represented class struggle and proletarian consciousness in urban centers like Shanghai and Harbin. These plays appraised Western consumerism and entertainment culture, and reinforced Maoist ideals of socialist purity and collective identity. Despite their didacticism, these plays provided valuable insights into China's swiftly changing society. Haiping (1998) proclaims, "social and cultural critiques in dramatically effective ways...their pointed critiques of contemporary Chinese society were therefore woven together with their pronounced emotional attachment to the well-being of the ordinary majority, a commitment that had been one of the essential components in the legitimacy of the PRC government and its proclaimed programs" (p. xiii). They addressed themes such as the widening urban-rural divide, the psychological impact of revolution, the ideological remolding of intellectuals, and post-war heroism. Although many of these works lack literary subtlety by today's standards, they served as significant tools of political education and social commentary.

Representation of Old Stories in a New Context

In Post-1949 China, historical plays (lishi ju) appeared as a prominent and safer alternative to contemporary drama. The risks involved in directly depicting present-day issues, dramatists turned to the past, using the narratives and figures of pre-modern Chinese

history to reflect the ideological needs and political concerns of China. New historical dramas (xinbian lishi ju), as termed by Wagner (1990), became a popular and respected genre during 1949–1966, particularly among veteran writers who could navigate the complex political and artistic expectations of the time. Xu (2023) views, "The dialogue of the characters in the play is full of life and Beijing flavor, which makes the audience feel as if they were there, and the use of a lot of 'subtext' in the dialogue is more effective" (p. 346). From the 'old drama revolution' to socialist 'new opera,' this shift reshaped cultural forms in political ideology, social institutions, and traditional boundaries like elegance/mundane and Chinese/Western. Zhang (2021) asserts, "The importance of the study of model operas lies in breaking down the 'imaging holes' of the picture of mainstream Cultural Revolution. As a relic of proletarian culture, the model opera adds the musical form as a 'listening device' to the existing studies of the Cultural Revolution" (p. 51). The primary authors of these new historical dramas were not young, avant-garde writers or previously independent intellectuals. They established cultural leaders within China to utilize historical storytelling as a strategic medium to intervene in contemporary ideological debates.

Post-49 dramatists reframed dynastic crises, moral conflicts, and episodes of social injustice from China's past to serve current political narratives. Jingting and Chao (2024) cite the ideas of Mao and state, "History is made by the people, but on the old theater stage … the people became the dregs, and the lords and maidens and young ladies ruled the stage. This reversal of history is now reversed again by you, restoring the face of history, and from then on, the old drama has opened a new face, so it is worth celebrating (p. 371). Guo Moruo stands out as a central figure in this sub-genre. His plays Cai Wenji (1959) and Wu Zetian (1960) continue his long-standing interest in depicting heroic and unconventional women. In his earlier literary work, Guo had already celebrated female figures such as Nie Ying, Zhuo Wenjun, and Wang Zhaojun. In Cai Wenji, Guo reimagines the historical writer as a victim of wartime abduction and a patriotic and intellectually endowed woman who embodies the virtues of national loyalty and cultural refinement. In this retelling, Guo also rehabilitates Cao, traditionally cast as a villain, presenting him instead as a wise statesman and cultured leader. These historical reinterpretations assisted in aligning ancient figures with the moral and ideological demands of the Chinese era. Zicheng (2007) figures out:

> The central ideas behind Guo's historical dramas were in current politics, after which he sought out incidents or figures in 'history' on which he could hang the words he wished to address to the issue. . . . The author was fully aware that the current age held in esteem 'admirable characters' who were greatly talented and who opened up a "new epoch" in history, and his highly romanticized rewriting was in response to this 'spirit of the time'. (p. 194)

Following Guo's path, other celebrated playwrights contributed notable works in this genre. Tian Han's Guan Hanqing (1958) modifies the Yuan dynasty playwright into a symbol of resistance and social justice. In Tian's hands, Guan becomes a literary warrior, wielding

drama as a tool to fight against corruption and oppression, and echoes Tian's own identity as a dramatist and cultural reformer. As scholar Liang Luo notes, Tian saw in Guan Hanqing a reflection of himself—an intellectual driven by a desire to speak for the marginalized community.

Cao Yu's The Gall and the Sword (1961), written after the hardships of the Great Leap Forward, dramatizes the perseverance of the King of Yue, who, despite numerous defeats and humiliations, eventually triumphs over the King of Wu. This tale of pliability and delayed success mirrored the political message that perseverance under the Communist Party would yield national prosperity and unity. Wu Han's Hai Rui Dismissed from Office (1961) gained massive attention. As a respected Ming historian, Hai Rui, is portrayed as a fearless and principled official who dares to confront imperial corruption. The play, later adapted into a Peking Opera, became highly controversial and played a key role in the political pretext leading to the Cultural Revolution. As Hong Zicheng notes in his analysis of Guo Moruo's historical dramas, the strategy of these works was to locate suitable historical figures and episodes that could support contemporary ideological messages. Guo, and others, selected admirable characters from the past who resonated with the values of the new socialist era—talented individuals who broke with tradition to open a new epoch. These characters, though rooted in ancient history, were reshaped in a romanticized style to embody the spirit of socialist transformation and revolution.

Unearthing Socialist Ideology

Within this highly politicized context, Lao She's Dragon Beard Ditch (1952) and Teahouse (1957) epitomize Chinese society. Dragon Beard Ditch aligns with revolutionary drama in its image of contemporary urban poverty and its optimistic position on socialist realism. The play functions as an example of the new theatre's pursuit to appear for the present and imagine a better future. At the same time, its attention to individual psychology and historical endurance marks it as an exception in Lao She's oeuvre. Wagner (1990), scholar of Chinese drama, points out, "As a matter of principle, the historical play makes reference to the immediate present" (p. 44). One of the most unique contributions to post-49 drama is Lao She's Dragon Beard Ditch, a work that both exemplifies and departs from the conventions of socialist theatre. Lao She, known for his deeply humanistic and historically grounded fiction, took a bold step in writing this play. In his essay "How I Wrote Dragon Beard Ditch," he bluntly echoes on his hesitation, noting that it was 'the biggest venture' in his profession, largely because the events he depicted had not yet fully unfolded. At the time of writing, the Dragon Beard Ditch neighborhood in Beijing had not been renovated, and a speculative and optimistic projection rather than a historical account. Shiao-ling Yu (2013) "This principle is manifested in Teahouse... and it was written ostensibly "to bury the three historical periods," (p. 98). The play links the 1898 Hundred-Day Reform to 1957's Hundred Flowers Movement, portraying persecuted intellectuals as modern martyrs through satire and historical parallels. Chen (2010) points out, "So the movement was crushed, nipped in the bud. But I'd better stop and hold myself in check, Talking

too freely will surely risk my neck"! (p. 550). Teahouse is both an exception and an example of a different kind. Widely considered Lao She's masterpiece offers a panoramic view of Chinese society from the late Qing dynasty through the Republican era and into early PRC rule. Unlike the optimistic tone, Teahouse presents a deeply pessimistic vision of historical change.

Zicheng (2007) emphasizes the political function of dramas, "After 1949 …there was also a continuing stress on the notion of the direct, intimate relationship between the theatre, politics, and society" (p. 186). As Agamben theorizes, exceptions and examples are mutually constitutive. Dragon Beard Ditch and Teahouse constitute this duality within drama; each serves to illustrate the ideological and aesthetic boundaries of their time. Set in 1948, Dragon Beard Bitch, the play portrays the story of a notorious slum in South Beijing, filled with poverty, disease, and hopelessness. After the establishment of the PRC, the government transformed the area and improved the living conditions of ghetto inhabitants. It portrays the squalor of life under the Republican regime and contrasts it with the promise of renewal under the new Chinese government. Lao She crafts a narrative that aligns with the popular socialist slogan: The old society turned people into ghosts; the new society turns ghosts back into people. The ditch itself becomes a potent metaphor, symbolizing the decay of old China and the potential for transformation under socialism. What makes Dragon Beard Ditch particularly interesting is Lao She's use of a kind of dramatic presentism. As scholar Yomi Braester argues, Lao She projects a utopian vision of the future into the present, and makes the play feel like a real-time transformation even though the actual renovations had not yet occurred. Lao She provides a prescriptive model of socialist urban renewal and turns the dirty slum into a space of ideological unearthing. The characters' redemption becomes possible not through individual effort but through the collective power of state intervention and political ideology.

Through Dragon Beard Ditch, Lao She constructs a powerful dramatization of the dramatic ideological narrative promoted by the Party: that socialism is the only cure for the moral, physical, and social diseases of old China. While the play serves as a model of new ideology in form and function, and sympathizes characters within a politically constrained framework. His work thus straddles the line between state propaganda and meaningful social critique. The new historical dramas from 1949-1966, like Dragon Beard Ditch and the Teahouse, illustrate how theatre in China was employed as a critical vehicle for political messaging, historical reinterpretation, and ideological education. Song (2019) states, "Teahouse, on the other hand, offers both a rare exception, a masterpiece with unparalleled artistic achievement, in the overwhelmingly politicized and homogeneous literary field, and an example of Lao She's illustratively pessimistic view of the historical past and social-political change from the late Qing Dynasty through the Republican and Civil War periods to the early phase of New China" (p. 411). These plays offer valuable insights into the cultural and intellectual currents of their time and provide a rich field for both historical inquiry and literary analysis. Hartley and Montgomery (2009) observe, "the internationalization of the creative industries would prove transformative

in China, encouraging the growth of individual talent, 'content' innovation, and a shift from centrally planned command-and-control industries to a complex dynamic system growing via the self-organized interactions of myriad creative industries" (p. 10). In Dragon Beard Ditch and the Teahouse, Lao She constructs a vivid dramatization of the transformation of Beijing's urban slums under socialism.

Portrayal of the Ditch and the City

The play Dragon Beard Ditch centers on impoverished characters such as Ding Si, a disillusioned pedicab driver (a tricycle rickshaw), and Erchun, a semi-literate woman trapped in poverty. For Ding Si, his pedicab represents more than a means of income—it symbolizes the hope of mobility, of escape from the physical and psychological confines of the slum. Likewise, Erchun expresses a strong resistance to the oppressive norms of her environment and voices the dream of fleeing the decaying neighborhood. Leonesi (2023) underlines, "However, Teahouse does not describe the new life under communism, unlike most dramas from that period, including other plays by Lao She, such as Dragon Beard Ditch (Longxu gou, 1952), a classic example of propagandist drama whose literary quality is debatable" (132). Yet neither character can escape; the 'ditch' represents a dead-end, both literally and metaphorically, in a society that has abandoned them. The play captures the squalor of pre-socialist urban life with undaunted realism. Old Chao, a recurring voice of experience, suffers from malaria. After hearing socialist propaganda, he reframes his illness not simply as the result of mosquito bites but as the physical consequence of social corruption, inflicted by past regimes, gangsters, and foreign occupiers. His ailment thus becomes a metaphor for deeper societal decay. Edgley (2013) asserts, "To these critics, the dramaturgical image of human beings as expressive creatures who are also aware of their expressiveness means that they are persons constantly concerned with manipulating that awareness in order to influence how others see them. Possibilities become probabilities and probabilities become certainties" (p. 7). Lao She deliberately draws an equivalence between bodily sickness and the 'social cancers' of Republican-era Beijing, transforming the ditch into a symbol of urban disease.

Aligned with dramatic ideology, Lao She attempts to draw a clear distinction between moral wickedness and physical griminess. He believes that through his dramatic art, Beijing's transformation rests on the premise that moral reform and social justice can cleanse both body and city. He assesses the nationalist government for the city's degradation, and portrays the post-49 regime as capable of hygienic and ideological purification. The play signals a shift: after the founding of the PRC, hope enters the scene. Although the actual renovation of Dragon Beard Ditch was incomplete at the time of writing, and presents the transformation as inevitable. His drama is an imaginative faith—a literary embodiment of utopian belief in socialist redemption. It maps the shift from a bitter past to a glorified future, and dramatizes the people's desire for change and their ideological awakening. The play recovers suppressed voices, narrates public suffering, and constructs a dialectical journey between revolutionary doubt and socialist belief.

The families portrayed in the play, once despondent and trapped, are reanimated with purpose. They invest their trust—and even their bodies—into the future Beijing, a purified socialist space that promises dignity, order, and well-being.

Characters like Erchun transform new socialist citizens. She celebrates the disappearance of hoodlums and smut, and, now full of zeal, threatens to silence dissenters. Brissett and Edgley (1990) portray, "…dramaturgy is not a closed theoretical position, but rather a way of describing human behavior, that it is such an informative and heuristic mode of thought" (p. 24). Old Chao takes on the role of a neighborhood activist, proclaims the government's care for the poor: They're doing something for you and me…so that we shan't have to be ill, and die, stink, and be filthy, and go hungry, anymore. Sun (2025) views "[this play] symbolically embodied a public culture of socialist modernity, which was a hybrid between Western ideals of modernity with the specifically socialist politics in the local historical context" (p. 15). In this vision, personal trauma, disease, and even death can be overwritten by the emerging collective identity of a socialist 'imagined community.' One of the most compelling moments comes when Mad Cheng's wife, once living in misery, imagines installing a stone monument to commemorate the ditch's former state: There used to be a stinking Ditch here; the people's government made it into a fine road. This vision is not only a tribute to progress, but also a grassroots proposal for civic remembrance—an acknowledgment of the bitter past that legitimizes the present. Mad Cheng, the folk artist, imagines an even grander transformation: converting the area into a public park. His visionary song places the ditch alongside Beijing's historic landmarks, praising the government's role in elevating the urban poor to lives of hope and dignity.

The play Dragon Beard Ditch is frequently viewed as a propaganda piece; its literary and emotional resonance stalks from its blending of metaphor, materialism, and political ideology. In contrast, his Teahouse is extensively watched as his crowning dramatic achievement. Spanning the fall of the Qing dynasty to the Republican era's collapse, the play uses the Yutai Teahouse as a symbolic stage to dramatize fifty years of social and political decay. The teahouse is more than a public venue; it is a microcosm of Beijing and of China itself. As Lao She explains, "People from all walks of life came to the teahouses... they were a microcosm of society as a whole" (p. 3). Through the interactions among customers, merchants, soldiers, and beggars, the play illustrates the disintegration of public trust and the suffocation of civic life. Political chaos, social inequality, and moral erosion unfold within this intimate space. The Teahouse operates on both physical and psychological levels. As time moves, the once-bustling establishment becomes increasingly confined, and symbolizes the shrinking space for public discourse and emotional resilience. Furniture is moved, rearranged, or disappears entirely to mark both temporal shifts and spiritual decline.

The tension between the teahouse and the outside street—a once-fluid boundary—hardens, representing the growing alienation and fragmentation of the public sphere. Together, Dragon Beard Ditch and Teahouse offer contrasting portrayals of urban life in

Maoist China. The former celebrates the promise of socialist transformation and projects an idealized vision of renewal and purity. The latter stands as a somber elegy to a society unraveling over decades. Agamben (1998) argues, "Exception and example constitute the two modes by which a set tries to find and maintain its own coherence. But while the exception is, as we saw, an inclusive exclusion (which thus serves to include what is excluded), the example instead functions as an exclusive inclusion" (p. 21). Dragon Beard Ditch exemplifies the forward-looking optimism of early socialist realism, Teahouse reveals the more complex, ambivalent dimensions of Chinese modernity, blending social critique, historical consciousness, and literary depth. Song (2019) asserts:

Dragon Beard Ditch provides both an example of Maoist drama of performing the present (and the future), and an exception in Lao She's own representative repertoire of theatrical writings about envisioning the past. Teahouse, on the other hand, offers both a rare exception, a masterpiece with unparalleled artistic achievement, in the overwhelmingly politicized and homogeneous literary field, and an example of Lao She's illustratively pessimistic view of the historical past and social-political change from the late Qing Dynasty through the Republican and Civil War periods to the early phase of New China. (p. 411)

In early PRC China, aesthetic and political challenges spurred timely, politicized artistic responses, ignited debates among dramatists, and fueled a surge in dramatic productions. In Dragon Beard Ditch, he adopts a different approach. The transformation of a slum into a socialist space marks a celebratory chronotope of progress. The ditch—once a polluted and disease-ridden corner of the city—becomes a symbol of the new socialist order. The drama enacts a fantasy of cleansing both physical filth and social injustice. The residents gain class consciousness, and the socialist sun metaphorically rises over their lives. The play functions as an idealized projection of post-49 space and time—a sanitized, collective future replacing the individual traumas of the past.

Nostalgia and Affective Space

Lao She's characters cling to nostalgic ideals, even as the outside world grows more brutal and uncertain. He presents the Teahouse as a site of memory and mourning. The play's ending, steeped in melancholy and resignation and offers no salvation through revolution but only a grim recognition of the past's persistent ghosts. Through ideological purification and urban planning, the space is reimagined as a beacon of health, order, and collective uplift. Leonesi (2023) in the Teahouse

The play is a tableau vivant of Beijing society over a period of around forty years, from the last years before the collapse of the Qing dynasty, just after the failure of the Hundred Days of Reform in 1898 (first act), through the warlord period after Yuan Shikai's (1859–1916) unsuccessful attempt to restore the empire (second act), to the last years of Nationalist rule at the end of the 1940s (third act). Many stories unfold, and many customers intersect at the teahouse … connecting the three acts. (p. 131-32)

The Teahouse lacks a unified emotion or singular narrative thread and relies instead on repeated situations. These repetitions—scenes of frustration,

political failure, or economic decay—provide an emotional topography to weave together sadness, irony, longing, and despair. Benjamin (1968) points out, "The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again" (p. 225). He famously remarked that the Teahouse buries three historical eras—the late Qing dynasty, the Republican period, and the final years before the victory of the PRC. This raises a critical question: Does he treat these eras with a single, unified emotional tone, or construct a sequence of distinct, era-specific emotional landscapes? The spatial and psychological site of this unfolding history is the Teahouse, an evolving structure that serves not only as a literal business but as a metaphorical vessel for Beijing's cultural, political, and emotional history. Chen (2002) observes that the Teahouse is deeply rooted in the old culture of Beijing and resists the implications of historical change. It stages a continual return to forms of decline rather than offering a forward-moving narrative of redemption or transformation. How does the author represent this resistance to change in the teahouse's physical design and in the affective experiences of those who inhabit it? Its three acts include the following major events of the historical development of Chinese drama. Yu (2013) states, "Act I takes place just after the 1898 Hundred-Day Reform has failed. Act II is set in the warlord period circa 1918, after President-elect Yuan Shikai's failed attempt to restore the monarchy with himself as emperor. Act 3 covers the last few years of the Nationalist rule in the late 1940s" (p. 92-93). In Act I, Lao She sets the drama in the autumn of 1898, following the failure of the Hundred Days' Reform. The Qing Empire is in visible decline. The Yutai Teahouse is introduced as a grand, high-ceilinged establishment with ample space, rich in social and sensory life.

The stage description reflects the material abundance Teahouse—rows of benches, rectangular and square tables, a courtyard, shaded areas, and birdcages hung throughout. Customers come not only for tea but for gossip, political debate, and entertainment. Though change is looming outside, the Teahouse presents itself as a protective bubble, seemingly untouched by external turbulence. Three central male characters—Wang Lifa, the teahouse owner; Master Chang, a Manchu banner man; and Qin Zhongyi, a capitalist reformist—stand at the crossroads of this decaying empire. They embody different responses to cultural inertia: Wang clings to cautious pragmatism, Chang upholds the old order's dignity, and Qin looks to the West for salvation. Nostalgia pervades the tone, the configuration of the Teahouse in Act I suggests a space still open to public interaction and collective life. Yet ominously, even in this golden age of teahouse culture, a recurring sign declares: 'Do Not Discuss Affairs of State.' This sign sets the stage for the persistent tension between public performance and political suppression and suggests a deepening political paranoia and the erasure of meaningful public discourse.

Act II marks the decline of this teahouse culture amid the chaos of the warlord era. The teahouse is physically divided: the front area remains a gathering space, and the rear is converted into a lodging house, signaling a breakdown in both commercial integrity and cultural

continuity. Traditional symbols—The Eight Drunken Immortals painting, the God of Wealth shrine—are replaced by advertisements for cigarettes and Westernized images of women. This intrusion of commodity culture displaces the old aesthetic values. The tables shrink, the colors dull, and the once-rich soundscape fades. The space is restructured to suit survival rather than tradition, and Wang's attempts to modernize feel like a betrayal of his past. The teahouse's visual disintegration parallels emotional fragmentation. Characters now speak in tones of sarcasm, resignation, and fatigue. Despite political changes outside, the interior becomes more depersonalized and inert. Whereas Act I depicted a vibrant and complex social microcosm, Act II presents a compromised, fractured space that mimics the moral and cultural disintegration of the era.

Act III, set in 1948, the Teahouse has become almost unrecognizable. Stools and benches replaced the traditional wicker chairs. The interior design is drab, silent, and nearly lifeless. Political chaos and wartime desperation manifest spatially. The teahouse becomes an ambiguous ruin—neither alive nor entirely dead. Gangsters and opportunists, such as Little Pockface Liu, plan to repurpose it as a dance hall or card room, a symbolic desecration of its former cultural role. Wang Lifa's futile efforts to reform the business by adding storytelling, lodging, and even a hostess fail to arrest the teahouse's decline. He is emblematic of the small urban bourgeoisie caught in the tide of irreversible change. Meanwhile, figures like Chang, Qin, and Wang himself descend into despair and absurdity. Their final act of self-mourning—mocking a funeral for themselves—blends dark humor with genuine grief. Master Chang's lines, "I love my country, but who loves me?" and "I won't even have a coffin," evoke not only the collapse of empire but also a deeply personal sense of betrayal.

This sequence of affective shifts—from melancholy nostalgia to spatial disorientation and finally to existential despair—reveals Lao She's emotional mapping of Beijing and the teahouse. Rather than a singular emotional register, the play traverses a spectrum of feeling: wistfulness for the cultural past, anxiety amid disorder, and sorrow at historical dislocation. Kwok-tan Tam observes that while Teahouse lacks narrative unity, it achieves spatial unity through its consistent setting. The teahouse functions as both a spatial and emotional anchor in a violently shifting world. It holds together disparate historical moments and divergent feelings, creating a continuous site for affective resonance and political commentary. Its decay becomes an index of national trauma, and its transformation reflects the deterioration of civic life. The interplay between interior and exterior spaces—the teahouse and the street—also dramatizes the thin barrier between personal life and public history. The intimate losses of individuals echo national failure, while the outside world's chaos seeps into the tea-sipping rituals and gossip of the interior. The death of culture, therefore, is staged both metaphorically and literally. The concept of nostalgia as a dual structure offers a useful lens. Wang's attempts at survival reflect restorative nostalgia—a desire to reconstruct what was lost. Chang and Qin, on the other hand, embody reflective nostalgia and dwell in longing and melancholy without

hope of return. The performance of mourning in the final act, where the three old men throw paper money into the air for themselves, represents a synthesis of both forms: a farewell and a futile act of resistance. The falling paper money in their mock funeral becomes a powerful symbol to signify gravity, ruin, nostalgia, and the implosion of memory.

The Teahouse does not simply 'bury' three eras in a homogenous emotional tone. Instead, Lao She crafts a layered emotional geography—a deeply textured cartography of longing, loss, and lamentation. Szatkowski (2013) concludes, "The theory [Dramaturgy] should allow us to observe historical forms and contemporary practices, and it has to be useful on the floor of rehearsal rooms in the creational artistic process, as well as in comparison to the varied artistic forms..." (p. 2). Through repeated spatial and emotional deformations of the teahouse, Lao She reveals the psychological weight of political collapse, the erosion of civic memory, and the alienation of urban inhabitants. Lao She said, "People from all walks of life came to the teahouses; they were frequented by people of every possible character and persuasion. Thus, the teahouses were a microcosm of society as a whole. In covering the [fifty years of historical change] it was impossible to avoid political issues. . . . [In the teahouse] I would be revealing one face of the political change of the time" (p. 82). The Yutai Teahouse becomes a haunted vessel of Beijing's past, a warped space where history and emotion converge in mourning, nostalgia, and quiet despair. In Teahouse, Lao She portrays this fusion of individual and collective grief through the three elderly characters—Wang Lifa, Master Chang, and Qin Zhongyi—who are unable to reconcile with the profound sense of loss. Their mourning is not limited to the death of a person but encompasses the disappearance of historical eras, civic identity, and cultural integrity. These ashes of history and politics swirl through the warped space of the teahouse, now a metaphorical coffin and a deserted tomb. In this moment of self-mourning, the characters stand as living relics in a city that no longer recognizes them. The Teahouse becomes a symbolic site of soul-calling for the forgotten urban subjects of pre-socialist Beijing.

Conclusion

Modern Chinese dramas encompass diverse theatrical forms that emerged in twentieth-century China, including huaju (spoken drama) and modernized versions of traditional opera like Peking Opera and kunqu. Introduced around 1919, huaju has been closely tied to China's social and political landscape. These modern dramas often adapt literary works, and blend Chinese traditions with global theatrical influences. From 1949 to 1966, during the early PRC, dramas became both a cultural product and a political tool to shape Marxist aesthetics and state ideology. Playwrights used theaters to promote revolutionary ideals, class struggle, and proletarian ethics. As Song (2019) notes, this period saw a surge in dramatic production driven by the politicization of aesthetics, encouraged vibrant debate and innovated within the field of socialist drama. Dragon Beard Ditch and Teahouse exemplify Lao She's dual theatrical vision of Chinese revolutionary dramas. The former stages a utopian socialist present and future through optimism and renewal, the latter mourns a decaying past with

irony, melancholy, and nostalgia. These plays, produced within six years of each other, reproduce the contradictions of Marxist cultural politics and Lao She's own complex identity as a Manchu intellectual and storyteller. Through divergent narrative strategies, he maps both the promise of socialist modernity and the emotional wreckage left in its wake.

Dragon Beard Ditch offers a compelling chronotope (refers to the intrinsic connectedness of time and space in a narrative) that dramatizes the transformation from pre-Maoist dystopia to Maoist utopia through socialist urban planning. The original Dragon Beard Ditch, a grimy and marginalized ghetto, represents the decayed, unhygienic past of pre-socialist Beijing. With Beijing's rise as the socialist capital, the space is ideologically and physically cleansed, and symbolizes the socialist purification of both environment and people. He constructs a new, idealized socialist space where class consciousness and revolutionary spirit flourish under the 'socialist sun'. This imagined shift exemplifies the post-49 production of space and time. Teahouse, written six years later, takes a retrospective turn. It captures the disillusionment and political decay spanning from the fall of the Qing dynasty to the collapse of the nationalist regime. It becomes a shrinking public sphere, a melancholic and claustrophobic chronotope, where the failures of modern Chinese history unfold through material decline and emotional exhaustion. Together, these two plays reflect contrasting strategies within the Chinese cultural landscape. Dragon Beard Ditch envisions a bright socialist future, and Teahouse mourns a broken past. Through these complementary yet conflicting visions, he explores the tensions of space, time, and dramatic ideology in early socialist China, and makes his theatrical work both exemplary and exceptional.

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