Staging Spatial Conflicts and Affect in Emotional Postsocialism: Meng Jinghui’s Theater

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Abstract
Examining two plays directed by Meng Jinghui 孟京輝, Gossip Street and Rhinoceros in Love, this essay argues that Meng has successfully enacted the beauty of “lived experience” and “an uprising of the body” in the two plays, to represent, resist, critique, and parody the issues of postsocialist China, such as the homogenous power of globalization, consumerism, materialism, and emotional capitalism. By treating the offstage space as an organic component of the overall theatrical space, Meng not only extends the sphere of representation of space in theater from the static and limited performing stage to the porous open space that the audience inhabits but also makes the stage an alternative space on the boundaries aiming to transform the offstage space. Meng’s innovative, in-depth exploration and activation of the complicated relationships between languages and their parole, lived experience and commodity, and body and affect and their spatial manifestations inside and outside of the theater have effectively engaged the audience intel-

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lectually and emotionally while maintaining their awareness of the illusionary nature of the theater and of the realistic world outside.

With the accelerated processes of modernization, urbanization, and marketization in China, the confrontations between the homogeneous power of globalization and the indigenous local culture are increasingly manifested in spatial conflicts. The process of “de-differentiation” and the operation of “emotional capitalism” in postsocialist China become new concerns of China’s cultural scene. Analyzing Meng Jinghui’s *Gossip Street* (*Huaihua yitiaojie 壞話一條街*, 1998) and *Rhinoceros in Love* (*Lian’ai de xiniu 戀愛的犀牛*, 1999), this article argues that these plays have effectively represented an alternative space that contemplates, critiques, and parodies the postsocialist space that is dominated by consumerism, materialism, and emotional capitalism.

Meng’s theatrical works are primarily evolved out of the efforts of the early avant-garde in the mid-1980s Beijing theater scene. In the 1980s, the long tradition of the *Sitanni tixi* 斯坦尼體系 (Stanislavski method) in Chinese spoken drama—the assimilation of the theatrical space and the outer sociopolitical space—was gradually disturbed.1 Influenced by Western modernist and postmodernist dramatic forms, especially Absurdist Theater, Chinese experimental plays challenged the traditional realistic mode of grand narrative (*hongda xushi* 宏大敘事) and call for diversity and multiplicity in both content and form. Represented by *Hot Currents Outside the House* (*Wuwai you reliu* 屋外有熱流, 1980), *Signal Alarm* (*Juedui xinhao 絕對信號*, 1982), *Bus Stop* (*Chezhan 車站*, 1983), *A Visit from a Dead* (*Yige sizhe dui yige shengzhe de fangwen 一個死者對一個生者的訪問*, 1985), and *Wild Men* (*Yeren 野人*, 1985), experimental plays proliferated in the 1980s. *Signal Alarm*, written by Gao Xingjian 高行健, a playwright for the Beijing People’s Art Theater at that time and the 2000 Nobel Laureate in literature, established the Small Theater movement (*xiaojuchang yundong 小劇場運動*) in China. Plays are performed, literally, in small theaters, sometimes just in meeting rooms, rather than in large auditoriums. Gao’s subsequent absurdist drama *Bus Stop* pushed the Small Theater movement to popularity.

In the 1990s, Beijing became the center of the experimental theater movement. Directors such as Lin Zhaohua 林兆華, Mou Sen 牟森, and Meng Jinghui—the “Three Musketeers of Beijing Theater” (*Beijing jutan sanjianke 北京劇壇三劍客*)—began to experiment with foreign