

My Study on Bertolt Brecht

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Abstract: In the 60s, the author first started from the theory of Brecht and the "repetitive study" of his works, writing some papers, academic essays and commentaries, and then the author was not content with things as they were, having the intention of looking for breakthrough in the "relationship of Brecht and Chinese problem" research. However, it was hindered by the disdain of academic circles and author's ignorance of Chinese culture. In mid 80s, with a female German sinologist's enlightenment and drive, the author started from the blueprint problem of *The Good People of Sezuan*, determined to study the Chinese ancient philosophical knowledge well, and continued to follow the direction of "the relationship between Brecht and Chinese cultural tradition", writing *The good people of Sezuan* and the *Chinese Cultural Tradition* which had the value and caused a sensation. Since then, the author had gradually put his energy into the study of the relationship between Brecht and Chinese philosophy, and gradually discovered Brecht's great absorption and integration of Chinese culture. In face of many Brecht's quotations which are similar to the *Analects of Confucius Prose*, author also began to come up with a idea to study it with method of studying ancient literature as translation and annotation.

Key Words: research on Brecht; the fusion of Chinese culture and western culture; new method of research

I have studied Bertolt Brecht for more than half a century. The enchantment of Brecht lies in that he is a nonconformity and innovative writer and artist. He is a German playwright, poet, Marxist thinker and the originator of European epic drama of the 20th century. Bertolt Brecht attracted a lot of writers, artists and philoso-

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phers with his personal charisma to construct aesthetic rules together with him in the late 1920s and early 1930s. He established Nichtaristotelisches Theater by learning from writing skills of Chinese Zaju of the Yuan Dynasty and opera performance art in his play writing, which has broken through traditional European aesthetic thinking. From his youth, Bertolt Brecht studied philosophy of the pre-Qin period and historical documents while learned Marxism, thus his works are filled with Chinese wisdom. Therefore, he was also referred to as a “Chinese-style sage” at his old age. He influenced a whole generation of European and American intellectuals and led them to the path of Marxism with the joint efforts of Georg Lukacs, Hungary philosopher, after the Second World War.

I translated his play, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, in the early 1960s, which is the first time I got acquainted with Bertolt Brecht’s works. After that, I also translated his theory of epic drama, *Little Organum for the Theatre*, and other scripts, poems, prose and works of literature theory. Besides, I made an anthology of foreigners’ collected papers on Bertolt Brecht. My first paper on Bertolt Brecht finished in 1963 was finally managed to be published in *A Collection of Studies of Foreign Literature* in 1979. Why did the paper published 15 years later? Everyone who experienced this age can clearly understand. It is an age of class struggle when everyone was engaged in anti-imperialist activities and scholars needed to be very cautious about voicing opinions, not to mention writing a paper on Bertolt Brecht. And there is a Cultural Revolution lasting for a decade which is not an age of learning.

According to common practice, my study on Bertolt Brecht started from general questions, such as his theory of “epic drama”, creation of epic drama and performance art, “un-rhymed lyric poetry ”and realistic literary thought. These initial research results have acted as an enlightenment for readers to spread Bertolt Brecht's epic drama knowledge and understand his artistic idea. However, they belong to “repeated research” from academic perspective, some of which are my personal understanding. In my view, “repeated research” refers to a process where scholars figure out all researches done by predecessors and what fields remain to be explored, which is what I was doing in my anthology of foreigners’ collected papers on Bertolt Brecht. So are my papers, academic informal essays and short comments on Bertolt Brecht, from which I selected the second, third and fourth parts of this book.

Observant as I look, I’m unconventional by nature. Not contented with making repeated study, I began to consider innovative research, which is by no means easy task to put into practice. It occurred to me that Bertolt Brechts’ relationship with Chinese culture, a field which didn’t draw much attention from researchers of various countries, especially China, would constitute a fine task. An accomplished

researcher on Bertolt Brecht even thought it was a far-fetched effort. When someone in Chinese academic circles has just talked about Brecht's "China complex" was poured cold water on his enthusiasm by others. I have realized the importance of this task, but my lack of knowledge reserve in Chinese cultural phenomenon that Bertolt Brecht had paid attention to have become a huge obstacle. I knew little about poetry of the Tang Dynasty, Zaju of the Yuan Dynasty and especially for pre-Qin philosophy except for some people's names and titles of books during those periods and Chinese opera performance art. Such being the case, I had no choice but to keep writing repeated essays and figure out solutions at the same time.

I had a chat with a German female sinologist Barbara Kaulbach during her visit in Beijing in the middle 1980s, who gave me a copy of a doctoral dissertation written by a Korean scholar who studied the relationship between Bertolt Brecht and oriental culture. The scholar said that the chief source of *Good Person of Sezuan* remained the only mystery for him when he referred to the chief source of Bertolt Brecht's drama writing, which enlightened me that this issue could be the breakthrough point of my study on him. Since then I have attached great attention to collecting data with this regard. I happened to find the original outline of *Good Person of Sezuan* in *Bertolt Brecht Biography* written by German scholar Werner Mittenzweil, which was very similar to the plots of *Rescued by a Courtesan* by Guan Hanqing, a classic Zaju of the Yuan Dynasty. I was so excited about discovering something new, pretty much the way Galileo discovered that the earth travels around the sun.

From then on I determined to figure out all mysteries and explore a new path in my research, which led to my pause of ongoing task and a decade's effort to learn Chinese ancient philosophy. Many pre-Qin philosophy translations and annotations sold in bookstore were very helpful to me, such as *Full Translation of Mo-tse*, my first book in this field, *Full Translation of Chuang Tzu* and so on. It has become a great interest for me to read these books, and books which I hadn't been able to understand before like *Tao Te Ching*, *Book of Changes*, *Book of History*, *Analects of Confucius*, *Menci and Lieh Tzu*, have also become my new favorite. The profundity and fascinating charm of Chinese ancient philosophy made me gradually understand that why Bertolt Brecht was so keen on this field.

It didn't escape my memory that my original intention was to study Bertolt Brecht when I turned my 70s. My first paper on the relationship between Bertolt Brecht and Chinese culture, "*Good Person of Sezuan and Chinese Traditional Culture*", published in *Foreign Literature Review* in 2004, first answered the question about the chief source of *Good Person of Sezuan* and demonstrated how Bertolt Brecht absorbed the elements of Zaju of the Yuan Dynasty to form structural features of epic drama, which was a fruit of my decade-long effort. It was the first time

hat the question was solved so explicitly in the field of study on Bertolt Brecht's epic drama. My paper was thought highly of by Sheng Ning, the editor-in-chief, commenting that "the solid materials and meticulous argumentations are really amazing", which inspired me to further exploration. The paper was soon translated to English and published in *Frontiers of Literal Studies in China*, which brought me countless arrangement contribution and translation advertisements.

From then on I focused on studying the relationship between Bertolt Brecht and Chinese ancient philosophy. Pre-Qin philosophy was like a key to open the treasure chest of Bertolt Brecht. Rereading his works, including plays, poems and theoretical works, has given me a totally fresh feeling, which was exemplified by the fact that Germans said one could hardly understand Bertolt Brecht's works without knowledge of Chinese philosophy. I was amazed at his writing skills in the Inscription on a *Chinese Tea Tree Root Carving Lion*, but it intrigued me a lot to find that the first two lines of the poem, "Villain fears your sharp claws, while good person loves your grace" were the exact application of "good people obey its indoctrination, while bad people try to prohibit it" in *Lieh Tzu* "ZhuYang Pian". You would feel the profound conception of this poem when you associate it with the prosperous country and people at peace when Zi Chan, an outstanding politician and thinker, served as the minister of State of Zheng for three years. The poem, 1940, also reminded me of a saying in *Mo-tse* about logical paradox, which was quoted by Bertolt Brecht to show his inner anxiety and optimism in a father-son dialogue form in face of the severe situation of the Second World War. I have become calmer with more and more such examples being found. For instance, *A Dialogue of Two Scientific Systems* written by Galileo who suffered religious inquisition in *Life of Galileo* was similar to the story of King Wen of Zhou who was locked up by King Zhou of the Shang Dynasty? Besides, the hero in *Shackle in the Second World War* who feigned madness and acted like an idiot in front of German Nazi reminded me of Jizi who pretended to be mad for the great distress of seeing King Zhou of the Shang Dynasty's tyranny.

I had to show my utmost admiration to Bertolt Brecht when I realized he had changed the German title of *Change of Books* from Buch der Wandlungen to Buch der Wendungen, a slight change which showed his deep understanding of the book. Bertolt Brecht held that the true essence of *Change of Books* was not just change, but more importantly, transformation. As the Chinese saying goes, things will develop in the opposite direction when they become extreme. Or it was a process from quantitative changes to qualitative changes from the perspective of European philosophical term. As a great Marxism thinker, Bertolt Brecht was able to achieve mastery through a comprehensive study of modern western ideology and ancient eastern ideology. Considering his Chinese-style modesty, kindness, breadth of mind

and generosity in the old age, I couldn't help but thinking that Bertolt Brecht was a bosom friend of Chinese culture. Maybe someone would disdain my opinion, but I wouldn't argue with him for it was my personal understanding. To be frank, I was doing research in this field with Mr. Ding Yangzhong for such a long time that I hope some other people would join us to make it more dynamic. Bertolt Brecht wrote a lot of prose in quotation style which was similar to the form of *Analects of Confucius*. And Friedrich Schlegel, a leader of the German Romantic period, wrote tens of thousands of similar quotations throughout his life, expressing his philosophical and literary ideas. Those quotations are referred to as "Fragment" in German. Chinese scholar Chen Shulin translated it into "Duanpian" (断片) in *On German Romanticism*. Those articles written by Bertolt Brecht were edited and published in a book named *Mo-tse / Book of Changes* by German publishers and scholars after the Second World War, which has become a window for Bertolt Brecht's fans to understand the relationship between him and Chinese culture. It occurred to me that I could interpret his works by means of translation and annotation which was widely used in the study of ancient documents by Chinese academic circles while reading those sayings. Results of attempts made during recent years were collected in the first part of this book, together with other contents, are looking forward to your correction. ing recent years were collected in the first part of this book, together with other contents, are looking forward to your correction.