

The Localization of Eugene O'Neill's Play *Desire under the Elms* on China's Stage

LA LOCALIZATION DE DESIR SOUS LES ORMES D'EUGENE O'NEILL SUR LA SCENE EN CHINE

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Abstract: this paper explores the acceptance of Eugene O'Neill's play *Desire under the Elms* in China and studies the localization of this play on China's stage. From the angle of acceptance, it examines when a culture accepts the influence of another culture, how one culture chooses and transforms another and gives birth to a third one: a variant resulting from the collision and merging of these two cultures.

Key words: localization; Eugene O'Neill's play *Desire*; culture

Résumé: Cet article étudie l'acceptation de *Désir sous les ormes* d'Eugène O'Neill en Chine et la localisation de cette pièce sur la scène en Chine. Du point de vue de l'acceptation, il examine quand une culture accepte l'influence d'une autre culture, comment elle choisit et transforme une autre culture et en conçoit une troisième culture: une variante résultant de la collision et de la fusion de ces deux cultures.

Mots-Clés: localisation; *Désir sous les ormes*; Eugène O'Neill; culture

Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953) is unquestionably America's greatest playwright. He won the Pulitzer Prize four times and was the only dramatist ever to win a Nobel Prize (1936). He is widely acclaimed "founder of the American drama."

During all his career as a dramatist, O'Neill wrote and published about forty-nine plays altogether of various lengths.

Between 1920 and 1924 came his prominent achievements: *The Emperor Jones* (1920), *The Hairy Ape* (1922), *All God's Children Got Wings* (1924), and *Desire Under the Elms* (1924). These plays are daring forays into race relations, class conflicts, sexual bondage, social critiques, and American

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* Received 28 November 2009; accepted 19 January 2010

tragedies on the Greek model. What is more, the expressionistic techniques are used in these plays to highlight the theatrical effect of the rupture between the two sides of an individual human being, the private and the public.

Desire Under the Elms (1924), as the name indicates, represents a vivid description of cruel scrambling for property and greedy desire. The story happened on a private farm in New England. 75-year-old Ephraim Cabot, a brutal and selfish old man, owned this farm, which he grabbed from his ex-wife. With the hope of getting a new inheritor, he married another young city woman, Abbie. Despite of her marriage, Abbie flirted with from times and then fell in love with Eben—the son of old Cabot and his ex-wife. But dramatically, later on Abbie and Eben gave birth to an infant, who Old Cabot deemed as his own and liked very much. Old Cabot intended to pass on his farm to this new comer. At the same time, Eben, who could only be his own son's brother, began to doubt all this was a filthy intrigue of Abbie to scramble the farm away. Therefore, Eben converted all his deep love for her to intense hatred. While Abbie, in order to vindicate herself and her purity love, killed her son. Eben confessed the crime together with Abbie and accepted all the punishments deserved.

With the help of realism and expressionism, O'Neill revealed material and wealth desire and demonstrated abstract conceptions and unfathomable senses concretely, created fresh and stark images subtly, set unexpected plots naturally, made the drama successfully.

China first discovered O'Neill in 1922, when novelist Mao Dun introduced the latest development of American literature in a critical comment carried in *Fiction Monthly* (小說月報) (1922 vol.13, No.5): "In drama, new playwright Eugene O'Neill comes out very popular and is truly the first genius in the American dramatic scene." (quoted in 劉海平 et al, 1988:77). These might be the earliest words introducing O'Neill into China.

The first translator of O'Neill in China was Gu Youcheng (古有成), who published a Chinese translation of O'Neill's play *The Moon of the Caribbeans* (《加勒比斯之月》), and in the following years, during the 1930s and the 1940s, almost every year witnessed the publication of Chinese translations of O'Neill's plays. During these two decades, (except the years of the war of resistance against the Japanese aggression), there were altogether more than 20 versions of Chinese translations of O'Neill's plays published in China. From 1980s to 2006, almost all of O'Neill's plays have been translated into Chinese and great magnitudes of critical essays on this American playwright have appeared in various journals throughout China. Plays such as *Anna Christie*, *Beyond the Horizon*, *Mourning Becomes Electra* and *Desire Under the Elms* have become standard theatrical fare in China's major cities. Several of O'Neill's plays have been televised nationwide, in the process of gaining an enthusiastic audience of millions in China.

Desire Under the Elms was first translated into Chinese in 1943 and put on the stage as 《田園恨》 by 苦幹劇團, 導演: 黃佐臨. It was translated as 《榆樹下的戀情》 by 蔣虹丁 in 1983. Later, other translators such as 汪義群 in 1984, all changed "戀情" into "欲望", in order to be closer to the original. 1983, 1986, 2006, 2007, this play has been brought on China's stage again and again.

The most remarkable adaptation of this play comes from the local theatres in China. The adaptations made this play very vivid and true to Chinese life. They have been widely accepted and warmly welcomed by the ordinary Chinese audience. The best examples are Sichuan opera 《欲海狂潮》, by Chengdu Sichuan Opera Theatre, and 《榆樹古宅》 by Henan Quju Theatre.

From the angle of acceptance, comparative literature examines when a culture accepts the influence of another culture, how one culture chooses and transforms another and gives birth to a third one: a variant resulting from the collision and merging of these two cultures. Both 《欲海狂潮》 and 《榆樹古宅》 are not the original play. The plot have been changed here and there, the names of the characters become Chinese. The settings and scenes are Chinese too. But the theme remains, the tragic power remains.

Chinese culture often demonstrates the following law when accepting the influence of foreign culture: First, Chinese culture tends to accept the elements which are similar to or can be contained by itself and to repel the elements in conflict with itself. For example, most modern American drama that have been

awarded grand prizes are about homosexual, which has little influence on Chinese drama and movie. While in Chinese culture, it's easy to find echoes of friendship and heroism expressed in western drama. *Desire Under the Elms* reveals the smothering Puritan life, the greedy desire for wealth, which is similar to the thousands years of old China's feudalism and can easily find an echo in Chinese audience' heart. And the American dream for money, for wealth, for success has become the universal dream in modern time. The breaking up of this dream becomes the tragedy in modern drama.

Ethically , traditional Chinese morality condemns the immoral love between step mother and son, and believes punishment is sure to follow. *Desire Under the Elms* satisfies the expectation of the Chinese audience, although they may not fully understand the tragic power of the ending. In order to be more localized, 《榆樹古宅》 even adapted Eben as the step son of the old man, but audience still can't forgive them.

Second, Chinese culture tends to accept concrete things instead of abstract ideas with philosophical arguments. For example, Chinese dramas seldom bear reflection of abstract life crisis and care about ultimate meaning. They mainly investigate human life state from the practical and sociological angle. Third, Chinese dramas give priority to audience at all times, therefore they satisfy the audience's expectation vision and appreciation habit as much as possible. Chinese dramas never consider whether they are written to read or written to play, therefore, at the use of writing skills such as expressionist skills, those techniques that are too deceitful and abstract have to be given up in order to keep the interest of audience. Through understanding the law of cultural restriction, we know that acceptance is never unchanged and indiscriminate; on the contrary, it's full of conflict, filtration, transform, deviation and even reconstruction. In this course, culture undoubtedly plays an essential role. Besides, the exploration and understanding of these laws are also helpful to our construction of theory about comparative literature, to the practice of comparative literature and to the research of Chinese modern and contemporary literature from the visual angle of acceptance.