

An Exploration of the Interrelationship between Tian Han and the 20th-Century Chinese Left-Wing Theatre Movement

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Abstract:

This article focuses on the development of China drama in the 20th century, taking Tian Han and the left-wing theatre movement as the research objects. The purpose of this study is to deeply explore the interactive relationship between them and clarify their significance to the development of China's drama in a specific historical stage. The research comprehensively uses historical analysis method and text close reading method, deeply digs relevant historical materials, and makes a detailed analysis of Tian Han's drama works. Through research, this study finds that Tian Han vigorously advanced the left-wing theater movement and pioneered thematic innovations through his creative works, organizational initiatives, and theoretical contributions. The left-wing theatre movement also profoundly influenced Tian Han's creative theme, style and concept. Tian Han and the left-wing theatre movement interacted and jointly promoted the development of modern drama in China.

Keywords:

Tian Han, Left-wing Theatre Movement, Interactive Relationship, Drama Concept, Creative Influence

1. Introduction

China in the 20th century was in a critical period of rapid social change. Drama is an important form of artistic expression, which shows its unique significance in the tide of the times [1]. Tian Han's drama art has dual modernity pursuit and diverse localization tendency [2]. The left-wing theatre movement is an important chapter in the development of China's drama in the 20th century. With its distinctive political inclination and social critical spirit, it promoted the transformation of drama art in a specific historical stage [3]. It is of great significance to study the interaction between Tian Han and the left-wing theatre movement in China in the 20th century for grasping the evolution of cultural thoughts in a specific period and understanding the interaction between art and social changes [4].

From the perspective of academic research, there have been many studies on Tian Han and the left-wing theatre movement in the past, but the results of exploring the

interaction between them are still insufficient. From the perspective of modernity, Tian Han's complex ideas and creative practice in his early days are not so much the dualism of politics and art as Tian Han's pursuit of enlightenment modernity and aesthetic modernity [5]. From the perspective of localization, Tian Han hopes to unify the dual pursuit of enlightenment and aesthetics in drama through "national forms" such as freehand brushwork spirit, legend, musical means and opera elements [6]. The purpose of this study is to fill this academic gap and examine the internal relationship and mutual influence between them from a new perspective.

This study will use the historical analysis method to dig deep into the social, political, cultural and other historical materials of China in the 20th century, and restore the historical situation of Tian Han and the left-wing theatre movement. At the same time, using the close reading method, this article makes a detailed analysis of Tian Han's drama works, and explores the similarities and differences between his creative ideas and the left-wing theatre movement thought. Through this series of research methods, this article hopes to clearly outline the overall picture of the interactive relationship between Tian Han and China's left-wing theatre movement in the 20th century, and provide new ideas and insights for the study of modern drama history in China.

2. The Formation of Tian Han's Drama Concept and the Rise of Left-wing Theatre Movement

The formation of Tian Han's drama concept is not achieved overnight, but a dynamic process influenced by many factors. This process is closely related to the specific social and historical environment of China in the 20th century, and it is in great agreement with the background of the rise of the left-wing drama movement in the early stage.

Tian Han was deeply influenced by western romantic literature and drama in his early years. This injected the spiritual connotation of pursuing freedom and personality liberation into his creation [7]. The profound heritage of China's traditional culture endows his works with strong national feelings and humanistic care. However, it was the turbulent social reality at that time that really promoted the key change of Tian Han's drama concept. Seeing the poverty and weakness of the country, the darkness of society and the hardships of people's livelihood, his sense of social responsibility was greatly stimulated, and his concept of drama gradually turned to reflect social problems [8]. He began to realize that drama should not only be confined to the expression of personal feelings or artistic aesthetics, but should become a powerful tool to reveal social truth and awaken people's consciousness.

The rise of the left-wing drama movement in China in the 20th century also has profound social roots. At that time, China was beset with domestic troubles and foreign invasion, the national crisis became increasingly serious, and class contradictions were sharply opposed. In this era background, the general public is eager to express their dissatisfaction with reality and their desire for social change by means of literature and art [9]. From the standpoint of the proletariat, the left-wing drama movement clearly advocates that drama should serve the workers and peasants, and emphasizes the social education and political propaganda functions of drama.

The appeal of "paying attention to reality" in Tian Han's drama concept and the fundamental purpose of "serving the public and exposing contradictions" in the left-wing drama movement formed an ideological intersection at the early stage of the

movement. Although Tian Han's concern for "reality" at this time stems more from humanitarian sympathy and personal enlightenment ideal, it is romantic; The left-wing drama focuses more on class analysis and revolutionary mobilization, and has a clear political orientation. However, both of them are critical of the old literary form that is divorced from reality and whitewashes peace, and they are committed to shifting the focus of drama from the personal field to the social level. The early development of Tian Han's drama concept has unconsciously provided important ideological resources and talent reserves for the rise of the left-wing drama movement. Both of them were conceived in the same historical environment, and they shared the mission of transforming society and enlightening people's wisdom.

3. Tian Han's Role in Promoting the Left-wing Theatre Movement

With its outstanding talent and far-reaching influence, Tian Han has strongly promoted the development of the left-wing theatre movement in several key dimensions and has become an indispensable core force of this movement. Tian Han provided a rich and high-quality source of content for the left-wing theatre movement with his highly infectious and thoughtful creation. For example, in *The Death of a Famous Actor* (see Figure 1), Tian Han mercilessly exposed the destruction of art by the dark forces and the difficult situation of the bottom artists by depicting the tragic experience of Liu Zhensheng, a famous Beijing opera actress. This deep excavation and vivid presentation of reality has set a model for the content creation of left-wing dramas and led many playwrights to pay attention to social reality.



Figure 1. *The Death of a Famous Actor.*

Source: Adapted from publicly available promotional materials and performance photographs for modern productions of the play.

Tian Han also played a leading role in deepening the theme of drama. His works constantly expand the theme boundary of left-wing drama, from the early pursuit of personality liberation to the discussion of grand themes such as class struggle and national liberation. As shown in Table 1, Tian Han's drama themes show a distinct evolution in different creative stages. In the 1920s, his works, such as *One Night in a Café*, focused on young men and women's emotional entanglements and demands for individual liberation. In the 1930s, with the aggravation of the national crisis, *The Song of Revival* and other works turned their theme to anti-Japanese national salvation, emphasizing national justice and collective struggle. The change and deepening of this theme makes the left-wing drama more in line with the pulse of the times, and also enhances the ideological height and social value of the drama.

Table 1. *Evolution of Thematic Focus in Tian Han's Dramas Across Different Periods.*

Creation Period	Representative Work	Main Themes	Core Thematic Orientation	Audience Resonance	Influence on the Drama Movement
1920s	One Night in a Café	Emotional entanglements of youth; calls for personal liberation	Exploration of personal emotion and self-awareness	Sparked widespread discussion among urban youth, becoming a cultural phenomenon reflecting the era's search for individual freedom.	Injected focus on individual destiny into left-wing drama; inspired exploration of human nature.
1930s	The Song of Revival	Anti-Japanese salvation; national righteousness; collective resistance	Collective spirit of resistance under national crisis	Performed extensively by amateur troupes nationwide; its theme song became an unofficial anthem for resistance, significantly boosting public morale.	Advanced left-wing drama's focus on national liberation; strengthened social mobilization function.
1940s	March of the Beautiful Women	Women's struggles and resistance amid war and social oppression	Women's liberation intertwined with societal change	Generated significant attention from contemporary media, directing public discourse toward women's roles in the national crisis.	Enriched thematic layers of left-wing drama; expanded multidimensional social critique.

Tian Han actively organizes various drama activities by virtue of his high prestige and extensive contacts in the theater industry, and builds a broad practical platform for the left-wing theatre movement. He participated in the establishment of drama groups such as Nanguo Society, attracted a large number of like-minded young playwrights, actors and fans, and condensed a strong talent force for the left-wing theatre movement. At the same time, he actively promoted drama performance to the public, breaking the gap between drama and ordinary people.

In terms of personnel training, Tian Han has spared no effort. He trained a group of outstanding drama talents through the daily activities of drama clubs and the guidance of drama creation. These talents played an important role in the left-wing theatre movement at that time, and laid a solid foundation for the long-term development of China's drama industry. Tian Han's drama theory has made great contributions to the theoretical construction of the left-wing theatre movement. He put forward the

concept of “popular drama”, emphasizing that drama should be people-centered and reflect people’s lives and aspirations.

4. The Influence of Left-wing Theatre Movement on Tian Han’s Drama Creation and Concept

As an important ideological trend and practical activity in the development of China's drama in the 20th century, the left-wing theatre movement has had a multi-dimensional influence on Tian Han’s drama creation and ideas. This influence is reflected in the transformation of creative style and theme, and goes deeper into the adjustment of drama concept.

While Tian Han had already demonstrated a commitment to social themes in his earlier works, the rise of the left-wing theatre movement significantly deepened and redirected this focus. Under its ideological influence, Tian Han’s thematic concerns evolved from broader social critiques towards a more concentrated portrayal of the lives and struggles of workers and peasants, aligning his work more explicitly with the revolutionary cause. This shift is evident in Table 2, which compares his thematic choices before and after this influence.

Table 2. Comparison of Tian Han’s Thematic Choices Before and After the Influence of the Left-Wing Theatre Movement.

Stage of Influence	Representative Work	Main Subject Matter	Source of Subject Matter	Thematic Presentation Techniques	Impact on Dramatic Style
Before Influence	The Night of Capturing the Tiger	Tragic romance between young men and women, with social background depicted	Folk tales and personal emotional observation	Delicate characterization combined with environmental atmosphere	Romantic and lyrical style; emphasizes individual emotional expression
After Influence	The Tocsin	Student patriotic movement following the Mukden Incident (Sept. 18 Incident)	Major real-world historical events	Tight plot progression and intense conflict setup	Dynamic and vigorous style; highlights combat and resistance atmosphere. Its immediate staging after the event made it a powerful tool for political agitation.
After Influence	Storm over the Yangtze Wharf	Dockworkers’ resistance against imperialist oppression	Workers’ daily life and struggle realities	Direct depiction of workers’ suffering and acts of resistance	Rugged and powerful style; stresses class struggle as central theme. Praised by contemporaries as a model work demonstrating "drama serving the masses."

In terms of creative style, the left-wing theatre movement also promoted the obvious change of Tian Han. The movement emphasizes the propaganda, agitation and militancy of drama. This makes Tian Han's works more passionate and lively in

style. Although the romantic lyricism that may exist in previous works has not completely disappeared, it has been diluted by more intense realistic criticism and fighting spirit. Take *Storm over the Yangtze Wharf* as an example. This work is based on the dockers' resistance to imperialist oppression. The language of the characters in the play is concise and powerful, the plot is compact and full of strong sense of struggle. This change in style is more likely to arouse the audience's resonance and enhance the effect of drama in propagating revolutionary ideas and mobilizing the people.

On the level of drama concept, the left-wing theatre movement promoted Tian Han to further clarify the social function of drama. Tian Han began to emphasize that drama should serve the proletarian revolutionary cause and become a powerful tool to educate the people. The renewal of this idea is reflected in his theoretical articles and creative practice. He actively advocated that drama should go deep into the workers and peasants, reflect their lives and needs, and make drama truly become the art of the masses. The concept of collective creation and extensive participation in the left-wing theatre movement also made Tian Han realize that drama creation should not only be an individual's behavior, but should give full play to the collective wisdom and strength. This prompted him to pay more attention to the communication and cooperation with other playwrights, actors and the masses in his later creation, and further enriched and improved his own drama creation concept.

5. Conclusions

By studying the interactive relationship between Tian Han and the left-wing drama movement in China in the 20th century, we can see that they are intertwined and influenced each other in the historical process. Tian Han's writing style is not a noun or a tendency that can be generalized. In his works, realism, romanticism, aestheticism and symbolism are all reflected in different degrees. These literary schools do not exist alone in his works, but influence and penetrate each other. It is in this exchange and collision between Chinese and foreign literary schools that Tian Han began his artistic exploration.

The left-wing drama movement also profoundly shaped Tian Han's drama creation and thought. The movement urged Tian Han to pay more attention to the bottom of the society and major social issues in his creative theme, and his style was more combative and inspiring. No matter how the times change, no matter how technology develops, these eternal themes will not change. What Mr. Tian Han left behind is not only a specific creative method, but also an eternal artistic spirit. The study of this interactive relationship has important enlightenment to the creation and research of contemporary drama. Playwrights should pay attention to social reality, shoulder social responsibilities and create works that have both artistic value and reflect the spirit of the times.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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