

## MENG JINGHUI AND HIS CONTEMPORARY AVANT-GARDE DRAMA

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### **Introduction**

Contemporary Chinese culture is imbued with many postmodern elements. Some of those elements are, for example, the postmodern features reflected in avant-garde literary texts that have exhibited antagonism against mainstream culture and conformist language in terms of engaging with “playfulness,” “pastiche,” and “parody” (Sheldon Lu 1996: 145). This observation may contradict Fredric Jameson’s (1991) claims that postmodernism usually exists in highly developed capitalist countries, however, the actual existence of representative postmodern features in contemporary Chinese cultural expression verifies Edward Said’s conviction that “like people and schools of criticism, ideas and theories travel” (Said 1983: 226), and thus postmodernism has become a universal phenomenon rather than a specific one. Unlike the wholesale transformation of Western postmodernism as a concept containing philosophical thought, (such as those of Lyotard, Derrida, Lacan, and Foucault), socioeconomic transformation, (such as post-Fordism as proclaimed by David Harvey), and artistic experimentation, (as explored by Fredric Jameson and Linda Hutcheon), the Chinese postmodern concept largely concerns itself with using the postmodern ethos to “dissolve” and “decenter” the “hegemonic discourse,” such as that of enlightenment, humanism, or subjectivity, and to deconstruct any “central discourse” and any “authoritative ideology” (Sheldon Lu 1996: 146).

The elements of Chinese postmodernism as discussed by theoreticians are found mainly in literary and artistic circles. Take for example the avant-garde fiction and experimental poetry written by authors such as Yu Hua, Ge Fei, Daozi, and Zhou Yunyou (Wang 1997), the anti-allegorical literature exemplified by “hooligan” writer Wang Shuo (Zhang 1997), and the avant-garde artists’ political pop paintings that mix political and revolutionary symbols with pop and commercial icons (Sheldon Lu 1997a, 1997b). Xiaobing Tang (1993: 286) suggests that the experimental novellas and poems show two distinct features. First, they challenge the ideological tenet, and second, they satisfy the imagination of a reading public that very much longs for anything that suggests contemporary. These texts and art works of the 1990s, a time when postmodernism prevailed and peaked both in China and elsewhere, are considered postmodern mostly because they are unconventional in thematic topics and their style does not conform to the dominant mainstream and official discourse.

The above-mentioned Chinese postmodern literary and cultural works mirror some widely recognized postmodern artistic characteristics, such as parody and collage.

However, its label of “postmodern” is mainly due to its rebellious and challenging attitude, and it is this attitude that best exemplifies the postmodern as a universal philosophical trend. Under the rubric of the postmodern ethos, the writers mock knowledge and its manufacturer—the intellectual; they ridicule authority and orthodox thought; they question the rationale of disciplining and moral bindings; they poke fun at the dualist standard of truth and goodness; and they challenge any universal truth and grand narrative including the Chinese modernity project—the socialist revolutionary meta-narrative.

In order to make Chinese postmodernism more tangible and understandable, it is necessary to discuss it within the oeuvre of the overall postmodern philosophical paradigm. Taken as either a rupture or a continuity (or both) of an uncompleted modernity project by a number of scholars, postmodernity differentiates itself from and opposes modernity in many ways. Postmodernity critiques modernity in terms of its demanding and dominant scientific and moral rationality, its hegemonic meta-narratives such as Enlightenment, capitalism, and Marxism, and its dualist way of thinking, which are the “dominant codes of modernism” (Wang 1997: 23). Thus, the ubiquitous term postmodernity, or postmodernism, which is widely adopted by critics to address the Chinese postmodern fashion, grew originally from those metaphysical suspicions launched by Western philosophy.

However, China and the West experienced different modernity processes and there are gaping discrepancies between the Chinese and the Western social, economic, and political environments. Despite these differences, they still share some basic similarities, such as believing in scientific rationality and certain meta-narratives (capitalism or socialism) in governing nations, setting up universal rules to control the behavior and morals of the common people, and building up utopian prospects to rule their people. “Like it or not, the function of postmodernism here is precisely to dismantle various master-narratives about modernity and create a new field of uncompromising demystification” (Tang, 1993: 296). Therefore, to aid in the analysis of how the Chinese postmodern narratives challenge the hegemonic discourse and the authoritative ideology of China’s modernity process, I will examine a group of stage plays of a well-known contemporary Chinese avant-garde drama director, Meng Jinghui. The main focus is on three key characteristics of the postmodern ethos: anti-rationality, suspicion of meta-narrative, and anti-dichotomy. Through detailed textual analysis of the scripts, performance of the actors, stage settings and music of the dramas that are directed by Meng Jinghui, a postmodern attitude that is prolific in his works will be highlighted and an antagonistic avant-garde flavor that is carefully woven into his stage plays—“an avant-garde intellectual rebellion against the modernist episteme” (Wang 1997: 25)—is uncovered.

### **A Brief Review of Meng Jinghui and His Avant-Garde Drama**

Meng Jinghui was born in 1965. He graduated from the Department of Chinese Literature at Beijing Normal University in 1986. In 1988, he was accepted into the Central Drama Academy as a postgraduate candidate in drama directing. After his graduation in 1992, Meng became a director of the China Central Experimental Arts Theatre. From then on,

Meng Jinghui collaborated with others in adapting and rewriting many famous absurdist drama scripts from the West (such as Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot/Dengdai geduo*, 1991, and Jean Genet's *The Balcony/Yangtai*, 1993). These Chinese renditions of Western dramas enjoyed unprecedented popularity within the Chinese theatre circle. Later on, he directed many contemporary Chinese drama classics (such as *Woai XXX/I Love XXX*, 1994, and *Lianai de xiniu/Rhinoceros in Love*, 1999) in collaboration with his wife Liao Yimei (as the scriptwriter) for which he was rewarded with greater popularity among Chinese drama audiences, in particular with urban youth and college students. According to Claire Conceison (2002), Rossella Ferrari (2007) and Fei Liang (2006), Meng is the most influential avant-garde drama director in contemporary Chinese theatre and he is the one who has triggered a remarkable resurgence of stage plays in China.

Meng Jinghui's work is known for its social irony, its unconventional performance, and unusual stagecraft. Disordered plots, unique and unusual lines, impromptu performance, and innovative stagecraft are the first impressions Meng's audience has of his dramas. For them this generates infinite and reverberating images, and a multitude of emotions. A Chinese literary critic noted that:

When watching Meng Jinghui's avant-garde drama, there is a sense of being relaxed by the witty humor, the teasing and tender feelings, the cynical irony, and the insightful absurdity of the poetic romances. (CRI Online 2006)

A unique figure without peer in his field, Meng modeled himself as a spokesperson for heterodoxy and the avant-garde. He opposed the established social rules, discourse, and ideology, both official and elitist. Moreover, he shows a nonconformist, critical, and cynical attitude to materialism and degradation of society, which is embodied and exemplified in his experimental dramas. These dramas themselves have become synonymous with the avant-garde.

"Avant-garde" has been a controversial term in modern literary and artistic discourse, for it is not only regarded as the emblem of high modernism, but it is also considered a characteristic of postmodernism (Innes 1993). It may be conjectured that the uncompromising and rebellious character of avant-garde art has given way to the eclecticism and pastiche of postmodernism (Sheldon Lu 1997a: 115), however, Meng's experimental theatrical texts seem to straddle the concepts of modern and postmodern, causing the boundary between modernism and postmodernism to be blurred, and going so far as to allow the bridging of these two ambiguous discursive paradigms. The traditions of the avant-garde Western Theatre of the Absurd, reflect the influences of both the modernist and the postmodernist philosophical ethos where "the avant garde is essentially a philosophical grouping" (Innes 1993: 4). Similar to the Western theatre of the Absurd, Meng Jinghui's "stylistic xenophilia, [as] revealed by his consistent appropriation of absurdist aesthetics, did not merely function as a channel for formal innovation but also as a counter-discursive strategy for the articulation of ideological resistance" (Ferrari 2012: 113).

In Meng's case, the dissident, nonconformist and challenging spirit of his avant-garde drama works embody both the obdurate temper of high modernism and

the suspicious nature of postmodernism, in its questioning about the rationality and correctness of the socialist meta-narrative of China. Sheldon Lu (1997b: 78–79) points out that the avant-garde in art, as an artistic style, always implies political dissatisfaction. Chinese experimental art in the post-1989 period has been tagged as avant-garde art that is “iconoclastic, subversive, and antiestablishment,” and that deserves to be considered a “political gesture”.

In two of his articles written in the mid-1990s, Sheldon Lu gave an in-depth analysis of China’s avant-garde art, which he labeled as “cynical realism” and “political pop”. Sheldon Lu discerns that the “cynical realism” and “political pop” avant-garde art explorations created a new style of mixing serious and sacred revolutionary images, such as Mao’s portrait with commercial icons and trademarks of commodities (Sheldon Lu 1997a: 114). In this way, the established and orthodox symbols of the revolutionary culture and its legacies were desacralized and deconstructed, thus revealing the political attitudes and inclinations of the artists, which demonstrates a postmodern fashion both in its philosophical pursuit and in its artistic devices. Mary Wiseman (2007: 113) also comments on this distinct representation of the “political pop” phenomenon when she writes that, “[to] reduce Maoism to kitsch is to subvert its authority over the people’s beliefs and values”. That is why these works of “cynical realism” and “political pop” art, despite their popularity and being prized by international collectors, were banned by the Chinese government (Sheldon Lu 1997a).

Sheldon Lu (1997a: 115) suggests that the combination of political signifiers, commercialism and consumerism, indicates a postmodern turn in avant-garde artistic experimentations in the Chinese cultural domain. Ning Wang (1997: 22) echoes Sheldon Lu’s observations by arguing that postmodernism has been relevant both to avant-garde experimentation and to popular literature and culture. Based on Sheldon Lu’s and Wang’s understanding of the Chinese postmodernism and the avant-garde artistic experiments, the paper argues that Meng Jinghui’s experimental dramas indicate the postmodern turn in contemporary Chinese avant-garde theatre within a cultural sphere dominated by pop elements and aesthetics and a market economy.

Meng Jinghui established a unique theatrical language, “a Meng style,” (Conceison, 2002: 27), which Rossella Ferrari (2005: 293) describes as “pop avant-garde” and what Yuwen Hsiung (2009: 255-6) labels “Meng’s theatre of vaudevilleness” where he “combines various components from TV and popular culture, including commercial catchphrases, talk show, material, karaoke singing, rhythmic hand-clapping patterns from children’s games, cartoon comedy, soap opera romance, and so forth.” Meng’s turn to popular culture, which he did to enrich his avant-garde dramas, indicates a postmodern approach that consolidates rather than undermines his rebellious gesture toward establishment and orthodoxy (the Chinese socialist revolutionary discourse).

In China, popular culture’s revolt against high culture has two main concerns. First, it confronts and challenges the official communist discourse, and second, it confronts a similarly persistent coercion in Chinese culture: elitism (Sheldon Lu 1996: 160). This viewpoint is extremely relevant when examining Meng Jinghui’s drama narratives. Meng’s texts display an obvious critique of the communist ideology, and at

the same time, they mock the elitist cultural values that are embedded in the rationality discourse, which echoes the ideas of postmodernism as a philosophical paradigm.

In her article “Anarchy in the PRC: Meng Jinghui and His Adaptation of Dario Fo’s *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*,” Rossella Ferrari (2005: 293) identifies a “pop avant-garde” shift in the contemporary Chinese theatrical landscape, and argues it was initiated by Meng Jinghui’s dramas. This pop avant-garde shift changes the relationship of the two outstanding cultural rhetorics “avant-garde” and “popular,” from “the avant-garde versus the popular” to “the avant-garde cum the popular.”

The old is playfully reshaped and made contemporary; the literary canon mingles with mass culture; classicism goes pop. Innovation is attained through a dexterous orchestration of iconoclasm and reconstruction, of loftiness and lowliness, so that the unbending antagonistic thrust of his early modernist aesthetics merges with a new postmodernist consciousness. (Ferrari 2012: 162)

Building on Ferrari’s argument, this paper proposes that the postmodern turn exhibited in Meng Jinghui’s contemporary plays reinforces their avant-garde spirit. Instead of relinquishing or compromising the recalcitrant disposition of avant-gardism which is anti-establishment and subversive, Meng’s plays actually consolidate this feature. Further, the enlistment of popular culture in his works reveals Meng’s intention to deconstruct the authority and legitimacy of the official and elite discourses in the Chinese socio-cultural milieu. These official and elite discourses, mainly embedded within the socialist meta-narrative and its rationality, are also targets of attack by the postmodern ethos triggered by philosophical beliefs. Here, postmodernism is central in Meng’s work, which not only serves as creative devices but more importantly act as the philosophical and ideological foundation and gestalt of the Meng style contemporary plays.

Meng Jinghui’s avant-garde dramas help elucidate Christopher Innes’s (1993) comments that the avant-garde is a provocative phrase that serves as a symbol of both high modernism and postmodern artistic manufacture. In their nonconformity and defiance, Meng’s dramas share the spiritual temperament of both high modernism (avant-garde) and postmodernism (the postmodern ethos). They also share artistic characteristics of creation with both paradigms, such as unconventionality and innovation, in their “stream of consciousness” plot layouts, their parody and collage, travesty, repetition and deconstruction. However, no matter how Meng’s thematic topic and creative style is labeled, there exists, unavoidably, a challenging and uncompromising outlook in his dramas, which I call “avant-garde postmodernism”. This Meng style “avant-garde postmodernism” drama is “[a] potentially sensitive critique disguised as playful entertainment”, which “is more likely to go unnoticed by the authorities, and so to reach and affect audience in greater measure than any blatant attack would or could do” (Ferrari 2012: 248).

In the following discussion, Meng Jinghui’s avant-garde dramatic works are used as examples to show the artistic devices and innovations of postmodernism and the

postmodern ethos that is underlined by their philosophical origins. These attributes contribute to the works' questioning and challenging of the dominant political discourse in China in the socialist heydays: the socialist revolutionary discourse. The three unique postmodern features of Meng's contemporary plays are examined, and, in this way, Meng Jinghui's avant-garde postmodernism will be mapped out as it challenges the establishment and the orthodox in the official and dominant discourse and ideology. I will focus on three of Meng's plays: *Bootleg Faust* (1999), *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* (1998), and *I Love XXX* (1994).

### Meng's Postmodern Ethos

*Bootleg Faust* is a Chinese adaptation of Goethe's classical work *Faust*. It was written by Shen Lin, a playwright and scholar at the Central Academy of Drama, and directed by Meng Jinghui. As the dramatic director, Meng redesigned and rearranged the plot, keeping only the main characters created by Goethe and discarding and replacing the minor characters, although *Faust* remains the symbol of knowledge and authority. In *Bootleg Faust*, Meng depicts Faust as an erudite scholar who has extensive knowledge of the past and present, of the East and the West, and of different disciplines, as shown clearly in the lines below:

I have earnestly studied the subjects of literature, history, philosophy, politics, economics and law, and I am familiar with mathematics, chemistry, medicine, theology and agriculture. I have learned both new and old knowledge and I have mastered both big and little theories. I know *Thirteen Classics* and *Twenty Four Histories* thoroughly. Foucault, Lacan, Derrida, Roland Barthes are common meals. Rousseau, Marx, Gramsci, Althusser, Sartre are on my left; Hume, Adam Smith, Montesquieu are on my right. When I am busy I read Russell, Wittgenstein, and Saussure, and when I am relaxed I read Hegel, Fichte, and Kant. When I am not seeking fame and wealth I read Plato and Augustine; when I am radiant with health and vigor I read Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. (*Bootleg Faust*, 1999).<sup>1</sup>

From a modernist viewpoint, Faust is a symbol of knowledge and rationality, and one who deserves respect and admiration. However, in his contemporary, post-industrial form, Faust felt isolated and outmoded, and so he signed a contract with Mephistopheles (the Devil) and sold him his soul. Mephistopheles showed Faust around the exciting, colorful, and ebullient contemporary world and, during this process, Faust experienced first love, a beauty contest, national revitalization, and moon exploration, which are all symbolic phenomena in the Chinese social and cultural venue, and he was deeply impressed! However, he was also shocked by the contrast of the wonder and splendor of the real and concrete world, which made him feel "absurd" and quite different from the one he knew from books. Faust sensed the

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1 All the translations of Meng Jinghui's original works appeared in this paper are the author's.

crisis of authority and the legitimacy of knowledge and rationality (found in books), and he foresaw the end of its authority when he wrote:

Look at those PhD theses, one by one piled right up to the ceiling. In winter, when light pours in, those embossed names on the covers are lit up and changed into faded diaphragms, which remind people of the tombs in the dusk. I am still alive, but this academic cemetery already has a place for me. (*Bootleg Faust*, 1999)

In this way, Faust attacks and ridicules knowledge as fallible, and perpetual truth as languid and listless as tombs and corpses. Furthermore, knowledge, as a pivotal aspect of rationality, is downgraded and despised. Besides this dramaturgical attack on the philosophical base of modernism in its written script, *Bootleg Faust* further experiments with the postmodern artistic expressions and methods such as performance, and stage setting in its dramatic language. For example, a miscellany of pop entertainment styles have been employed like a comedy skit, fashion show, modern dance, music (such as RAP and soundtrack of broadcast gymnastics) and mime to distinguish Meng's theatre from the "deadly theatre", which is "a theatre without brains, namely, a mode of representation that is restricted by ossified conventions and hackneyed clichés" (Ferrari 2012: 117). The fashion show and modern dance used in the beauty contest scene to demonstrate the exciting life of the contemporary world inserts a pop flavor into the play. However, the mime performed at the end of the drama recounting the entire life journey of Faust is in contrast to the lighthearted tone of the previous performance with its comedy skit and fashion show. Consequently, the hodgepodge of these old and contemporary entertainment activities creates a postmodern collage.

The performance of the male lead, Chen Jianbin, who plays Faust, is full of inspiration, freedom, improvisation, madness and passion. He shouts, jumps, runs and stands upside down like a madman on the stage in order to give life and meaning to the plots and the metaphysical intentions of the play. In another scene, Faust scatters a whole barrel of water over the body of his lover when she becomes hysterical due to the death of her mother and brother. Her immediate reaction to this shock is apparent in her facial expression and her movements are full of tension, though lifelike and poignant. The drops of water flowing down from the actress's hair and her trembling limbs, the sudden suspension of her hysterical madness, (after being attacked by the water), and the subsequent composure she demonstrates, not only illustrates the freshness of acting of Meng's theatre, but it also stimulates the sensual and emotional interaction between the performers and the audiences.

The stage setting of *Bootleg Faust* is an additional postmodern move by Meng and represents the simple and abstract style of his dramatic rhetoric and aesthetic. Only a few props adorn the stage, however Meng used 15 trucks loads of sand and covered the stage floor with it in an effort to generate an effect of surrealism. When Faust finally dies in the show and lies on the sand, it triggers a melancholy sentiment of the bleak and desolate, and lonely and miserable among the on-stage cast and the off-stage spectators.

In *Bootleg Faust*, the dualist and dichotomous (binary oppositional) way of thinking is also challenged and ridiculed by the switch of spokesperson of knowledge. Dr Faust, as the symbol of knowledge, an elite intellectual and respected scholar, sells his soul to Mephistopheles, who, in Meng's play, is an agent of the post-industrial, postmodern society. This alludes to the elite intellectuals, who were once part of the central and dominant power in the socialist revolutionary society of China, although they have now lost their leadership position, and all those virtues that they promote, such as revolutionary heritage, goodness, kindness, beauty, and moral ideals, are giving way to the economic desires and impulses prevailing in a postmodern society. This echoes Thomas Kuhn's paradigm shift and Michel Foucault's *épistémè* as they anticipate that the dominant discourse may not always be in the center, and that there is a potential for them to be replaced by once marginalized paradigms.

Meng Jinghui's drama, *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, is adapted from Dario Fo's play and rewritten into a Chinese style farce by Huang Jisu. The play tells a story about an anarchist who is beaten to death by the police during the interrogation. In order to hide the truth, the police find a madman to use as a scapegoat for the murder of the anarchist. However, in the end, it is the police who are not only derided but are also used by the madman. In the opening scene of the play, there is an outrageous jingle performed together by the entire cast depicting a fart as a synonym for knowledge. Although the jingling rhyme appears to be common and vulgar, it is not, as it is really a caricature that pokes great fun at professors and scholars, the signifiers of knowledge and rationality, both in Western and Chinese realities:

Dario Fo broke wind, which went to Moscow, then came to Italy. The Italian King was watching a play, smelled this fart and became very upset. He found scientists to study this fart ... those who can make noisy farts can become headmasters; those who can make smelly farts will turn into professors; and those who made neither noisy nor smelly farts are nobodies as they are too mentally backward. (*Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, 1998)

Apart from mocking rationality, the play also satirizes the revolutionary official discourse of the Chinese Communist Party and the deteriorating social reality of contemporary China. In one scene, a policeman says to his colleague: "Our supervisor just wants you to have a clear class position and know your liking and disliking". In another scene, the madman says to the policemen: "I have been reformed and redeemed by your corrective influence". In another scene, the policemen say to their supervisor: "We will definitely complete the mission, and we will give free rein to our subjective initiative". This is an obvious inference to the rhetoric of the CCP that it uses for general ideological propaganda purposes and to reform its criminals, in particular the political dissidents. Thus, contemporary audiences can easily see the embedded implication of these sentences.

Also, the actors in the play imitate the filthy language, gestures, tones and manners of Chinese policemen which is intended to show the injustice, corruption, and overly bureaucratic nature of the CCP regime as represented by its public security systems and institutions. For example, the policemen call the anarchist 'bastards'. In another



scene, one policeman says to his supervisor: “They promote fucking Anarchism, and if they succeed, the first group that will become unemployed would be us”. When they interrogate the anarchist, one policeman says: “We are not allowed to hit the pandas and the black swans, however, we are permitted to hit you of the common herd”. In some scenes of the play, the police change their costumes from the Chinese style police uniform to black wind jacket which is an inference to the gang members in the Chinese sociocultural context. This postmodern parody of the official discourse reveals an anti-establishment and nonconformist nature of the Meng style dramas. In addition, the play points out several clearly visible malaises of contemporary Chinese society such as “the official kids”, “the rich kids”, “beauties”, “out of track” (which is a metaphor of extra-marital relationship), which are aimed at the corrupt social conditions under the rule of the CCP government.

Moreover, in *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, a postmodern collage of multiple pop performance genres is enlisted to highlight the unconventional feature of this play. For instance, guitar playing, singing, and traditional Chinese *quyi* (Chinese folklore performance) styles such as crosstalk, clapper talk and comedy dialect talk, form a postmodern medley of recreational activities. Among these brilliant performances, the highlight is the acting of the male lead, Chen Jianbin, who stars as the madman in the show. Similar to his performance in *Bootleg Faust*, Chen’s acting is full of dramatic tension and is absolutely outstanding.

With the help of the very simple props, three chairs, some bricks and a wooden stick, and an abstract stage setting with a big poster of Dario Fo’s face as the background of the stage, Chen displays his superb acting in an emotive performance. In the scene when the madman ridicules the corrupt behaviors of the policemen, he loses his temper, bangs the chairs against the floor, throws the bricks towards the ceiling, picks up the wooden stick and smashes the three cabbages, (symbols of the policemen’s heads), into pieces. Here, Chen’s performance reminds us of the physical externalizations of the emotional turmoil of June Fourth embedded in the performance of the actor in Meng’s version *Waiting for Godot*, which he enlisted as “a response to and reflection of the disturbing circumstances of a unique historical moment” (Ferrari 2012: 141). Similarly, the desperate performance of Chen embodies Meng’s derision and verbal attack on government corruption and power manipulation. Chen’s excellent acting in *Bootleg Faust* and *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* won him the Golden Line performance award in China’s drama circle in 2000 (Xu 2004).

The third play to be analyzed is *I Love XXX*. Meng Jinghui is of the same generation as Wang Shuo, the most famous writer of Hooligan Literature, and Liang Zuo, a playwright, well-known for cynical texts. Wang and Liang’s works embody similar reflections on the socialist revolutionary discourse, and they too have experienced the turbulent years of Maoist China. Meng is cynical and has deep doubts about the so-called egalitarian, collectivist, altruistic, and revolutionary nature of the socialist program. In *I Love XXX*, he uses hundreds of similarly structured “I love...” sentences to express the feelings and experiences of his 1960s generation. Members of the 1960s generation are not as conservative and loyal to the Party as those born before and during the 1950s, nor are they as open and as rebellious as those born in the 1980s and 1990s.

The 1960s generation is usually generalized as being decadent and in the lines below, Meng summarizes the social and political landscape of that era, using symbols similar to those described by Fredric Jameson (1991: 66) as “stereotypes of historical realities” to distinguish a period in history. However, in addition to restoring history, Meng’s main purpose lies in critically reviewing and evaluating history. This challenges Jameson’s conclusion that such reminiscing is shallow and non-representative. The examples here from *I Love XXX* show how it questions and deconstructs the socialist revolutionary meta-narrative of China.

I love my country  
 I love the people  
 I love teachers  
 I love classmates  
 I love collective  
 I love honor  
 I love culture  
 I love politeness  
 I love study  
 I love working  
 I love science  
 I love public property  
 I love four modernizations  
 I love [political] successors  
 I love politics  
 I love disciplines  
 I love organizations  
 I love rules  
 I love orders  
 I love morals

(*I Love XXX*, 1994)

In this example, Meng, using poetic satire, seeks to grasp the core values of the era as it holds in high esteem its respect for traditional and socialist revolutionary honor. He sees it as dominated by collectivist thought, and as a rules-following era, which, when compared to contemporary Chinese society where values and ideals have been steadily forgotten, have been diluted and are often dismissed outright. In these lines, Meng Jinghui is both aware of, and articulates, those classic features of the high days of socialist revolutionary era, features that are influenced heavily by his own memory and the memories of his peers during those “innocent” years. Meng highlights those characteristics of the totalitarian system that he remembers: the extreme discipline and a society devoid of individuality. In particular, the repetition of the verb, love, addresses those traits of the socialist revolutionary discourse that ironically contradict people’s normal desires and needs, and that further emphasize the absurdity of the assumptions of the socialist revolutionary meta-narrative:

I love a collective dance.

Confucius says: Three people walk together, and there must be a collective dance.

I cannot fall asleep. After carefully searching for half the night, I finally notice that there are only two characters, “collective dance,” on the paper.

Half seawater, half collective dance.

The road of science is by no means smooth, and only those courageous people who climb up along the rugged road will reach the peak of collective dance.

(*I Love XXX*, 1994)

In these examples, Meng borrows classical and other widely known texts and weaves them into a “collective dance,” giving the new text a revitalized impression, which is labeled travesty in the postmodern artistic lexicon. Collective dance is used as a political metaphor here for the ideals and policies enunciated by the socialist revolutionary meta-narrative. The second line above, a parody of *Lunyu* (*The Analects*) of Confucius, indicates the universality and intrusion of collective dance, which is used to lampoon the obligatory and totalitarian nature of the socialist revolutionary meta-narrative.

The second text used in the drama is from Lu Xun’s novel *Kuangren riji* (*A Madman’s Diary*, 1918). Here, Meng replaces Lu Xun’s famous phrase “man-eating,” which is used satirically and allegorically to describe the rotten and decayed society under the rule of the Qing government, with his own term “collective dance,” which, when understood as a symbol of Chinese “modernity,” challenges individualism and ironically describes the socialist revolutionary meta-narrative as being outmoded and in need of reformation. This clever juxtaposition of the “man-eating” Qing society with the totalitarian socialist revolutionary discourse, signified by “collective dance,” provides a classic example of the black humor and political satire that is used throughout Meng Jinghui’s dramas.

The third text used is the title of one of Wang Shuo’s books, *Yiban shi haishui, yiban shi huoyan* (*Half Seawater, Half Flame*, 1988). The popularity of Wang Shuo’s hooligan literature as an anti-establishment signifier, when juxtaposed with the ubiquitous existence of “collective dance” as an emblem of the socialist revolutionary meta-narrative, creates a farcical effect. In the last quote, “Collective dance” is imbued with a traditional revolutionary flavor as it becomes a type of revolutionary slogan, again ridiculing a prominent feature of the socialist China.

*I Love XXX* is a play consisting of hundreds of similarly structured sentences with “I” as their subject and “love” as their verb. This one, simple, and repeated sentence structure provides a poetic representation of the 1960s generation of China, and how this generation viewed the world, including the social and political landscape within which

they lived and their outlook on life. Meng achieves this “poetic” representation by clever, constant, and regular change of the object of the verb love, and by the movement and play of the signifiers (language) of scenes, sights, and emotions, thereby setting the audience’s attention and focus on this continuous movement. This unremitting changing of the object of the verb love, often contradictory of each other, provides a feeling that the character, the subject “I,” is very unstable and capricious. In other words, the carnival of the signifiers is confusing and ambiguous; a situation of opaqueness and ambiguity is generated. Therefore, a (previously) recognizable and evident meaning or feeling, center/logo, is dissected and dispelled as shown in the example below:

I love those positive heroes  
 I love those negative heroes  
 I love those authorities of knowledge  
 I love those cultivated classes  
 ...  
 I love those smiling villains  
 I love those famous people  
 I love those robbers of knowledge  
 I love those hooligans of thought  
 ...  
 I love conservatives  
 I love braggers and flatterers  
 I love capitalists  
 I love hypocrites  
 (*I Love XXX*, 1994)

The contradictory meaning demonstrated in these lines not only causes the reader or audience to be aware of the character’s vague feelings, but the lines also sound somewhat absurd and bizarre. For example, the juxtapositions of smiling and villain, robbers and knowledge, hooligans and thought, all have a schizophrenic tendency, according to Fredric Jameson’s (1991) ideas. In this way, *I Love XXX* confounds the boundaries between the assumptions and expectations of the socialist revolutionary discourse and its opposition, which reflects the postmodern ethos of anti-dichotomy, and undermines the authority of the socialist revolutionary meta-narrative.

The anti-establishment and defiant feature of *I Love XXX* is further highlighted by the performance of the actors who seemed not to follow any order or rules, but improvised instead. There are also several scenes that develop simultaneously on the stage, and which are not guided by a coherent and rational plot line. Another distinguishable characteristic of the performance is the deployment of the rule-obeying subject and the constrained individuality portrayed through the body gestures and movements of the actors. Rossella Ferrari (2012: 120) sums up the performance when she writes that “Meng’s style has been defined by a synaesthesia of sensorial effects and a primacy of the performative and the physical over the merely verbal”.

In one example, when illustrating the strict moral and behavioral monitoring of the government, the performers sit neatly in a row and put their hands behind their

backs, which is a routine practiced in the classroom of primary school student in China until the 1980s. When a whistle is blown, all the performers stop their activities and stand in a row with stony faces, which emphasises the disciplined lifestyle of common people during the Maoist eras. The actors also imitate the revolutionary pose that is popular during the heydays of the Chinese revolutions such as the Cultural Revolution.

There are also sensitive and sensual lines which are articulated by the actors to express the confined and depressed emotions and sexual desires which were taboos during the revolutionary eras of socialist China. For instance, when sex and pornography are mentioned, the performers close their eyes and turn their back to the audiences, and use sign language to reveal their fear and anxiety, while all the lights are turned off within the theatre and dark and silence dominate the stage.

### **The Postmodern Features of Meng Jinghui's Dramas: The Use of Various Media, "Little Theatre" and Pursuing Indeterminate Feelings**

The unique qualities of Meng Jinghui's avant-garde dramas are mainly due to his creative use and combination of various media and narrative methods such as sound, music, television, film, documentary, and electronic media to display the hesitant and paradoxically suppressed ego that is found within the intertwined subconsciousness and unconsciousness of the contemporary Chinese audience. The desperate emotions such as anxiety, hesitation, and excitement are stressed and made prominent through exaggerated musical effects, and improvisational performance. The soundtracks of Meng's plays are all vivid and impressive, and his music director, Feng Jiangzhou, makes the music an indispensable and obvious part of the drama, thus requiring the actors to spontaneously adjust and develop their performances according to their feelings toward the music. This may be interpreted as a postmodern improvisation that refuses to follow set (rational) rules. Rossella Ferrari (2012: 118) notices that "it is customary of Meng to allow his cast to work without detailed instructions and sometimes without even the script until weeks into the rehearsal so as to avoid imposing any restrictive boundaries or binding rules that may inhibit their creativity". Feng Jiangzhou says that both he and Meng Jinghui believe more in feelings than reason, and they spend a great deal of time discussing feelings: feelings about what they have seen, and feelings about what they have heard. All of this impromptu emotion and reaction stimulates the on-the-spot, impulsive and unstructured effect (YahQQ Gallery Web 2007).

Besides music, other media devices such as television and film screens, projector and other electronic media are employed in Meng Jinghui's drama language. For example, in *I Love XXX*, during the actors' performance, many television sets on the stage show files and documentary footage of the Mao eras, such as Mao Zedong and his followers in diplomatic occasions; Cultural Revolution parades on Tiananmen Square; the excerpt of the script of the play are projected onto the background wall of the stage. Toward the end of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* a black-and-white film is projected onto the backdrop, and the footage of the film shows episodes from Dario Fo's career, street rallies and political protests (Ferrari 2012).

With the help of the multimedia devices, Meng Jinghui, together with his music director and set designer, aim to manufacture illusions for the audiences and to build up a concept, an unprecedented social concept (Sina Web 2007). “Speech will cease to govern the stage” and there will emerge an “alternative stage.” This “alternative stage” will “no longer be governed by authors and their texts. The actors will no longer take dictation” (Ritzer 1997: 124).

Here, this “ideal stage” and unprecedented social concept that Meng and his colleagues endeavor to create is something that differs from the imaginings and assumptions of the socialist revolutionary meta-narratives that have, for many years, dominated and monopolized people’s lives. For instance, a reasonable and regulated criterion of behavior, or a mechanical and disciplined thinking habit, is the standard that prevents a free subjectivity and a postmodern ethos from emerging. Meng and his colleagues hope they can break down the conceptual barriers through the acoustic and visual impact aroused by the use of various media outlets and technologies. In addition, through their inventive use of media, they replace the rational and logical parts (meaning of the play) with the sensual and emotional elements, which are embodied by the impromptu performances of the actors and which, to a certain degree, reflects a burgeoning postmodern attitude.

Meng Jinghui’s style also refers to his sensitivity towards the inimitable potential of the “little theatre,” where most of his works have been performed. Shen Lin speculates that freedom and independence are the spiritual cores of the little theatre dramas (PlayPlay Studio Web 2006). Li Liuyi, a director of the Beijing People’s Art Theatre also argues that the “little theatre” plays not only refer to change and reduction of space compared to the normal theatre stages where dramas are usually performed, but they also have an individualizing tendency (Ibid). Besides the personalized plots and performances, Meng clearly understands and uses the advantage of the “little theatre,” in that it reduces the distance between the performers and the audiences and decentralizes the central focus. In *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, Chen Jianbin, randomly walks into the audience, speaking a couple of words to them and calling for their responses to the performance. In *Longing for Worldly Pleasures* (1993), the actors throw water on the audience to trigger an interaction between the performers and the spectators.

In the comparatively condensed spaces of the “little theatre”, Meng’s stage settings seem to pursue an impressionist and postmodern style, which is abstract and simple. Moreover, due to their tight budget, Meng’s dramas cannot afford expensive props and costumes, however, the suppositional performance of actors compensate for this. This kind of simplicity and abstraction regarding stage setting, costumes and props works together with Meng’s avant-garde style, a style which is much sought after by urban youths and college students. For example, in *Longing for Worldly Pleasures* the performers wear traditional Chinese style cotton coats and pants, and there are almost no decorations on the stage. The set designer has just put sand on the stage floor and the actors sit on it directly, and plastic sheets are used as walls to form the background.

Meng Jinghui’s clever use of continuous music and his unconventional stage settings, which are best accommodated in the “little theatre” environment, stimulate the

audience's curiosity and enthusiasm to discover new illusions, concepts, and feelings. The "little theatre" environment provides an ideal opportunity for an audience to uncover and examine their real individualities and subjectivities under the temporary, surreal conditions provided by Meng's dramas. According to Rossella Ferrari (2012: 117):

Meng imagines the theatre as an anthropomorphic organism that is endowed with sensorial functions and organs – eyes, ears, nose, mouth, tongue and, in fact, brains. Experimental theatre is anatomized and pictured as a living and thinking being to flesh out a conception of the stage as a sensorial and dynamic locus of energy...

Besides offering a revolutionary way of perceiving the world, he also provides a new perspective for understanding the world, a perspective that emphasizes feelings and sensations rather than material objects. Meng Jinghui appears to have some existentialist characteristics, for he considers that the world is absurd and illogical (PlayPlay Studio Web 2006). He says that he believes in feelings, and that everything has a reason for being what it is, and that it is reasonable and acceptable for different people to have different understandings toward things and to develop different ideologies and have different value hierarchies. A mature and fully developed subjectivity should be an open one, instead of a closed one; it should be self-managed and self-dominated and not controlled by the outside—the objective world (Ibid.).

Although this openness to feeling and imagination may lead to uncertainties of meanings and purposes, it meets exactly the goals of experimental drama representing a postmodern ethos. Kerstin Schmidt (2005: 20) echoes this perspective, and believes that it is commonly agreed that a postmodern view is composed of "ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuity, and the chaotic". One veteran actor of the Beijing People's Art Theatre, Zhu Xu, recounts that, when he and his colleagues were asked to talk about their understandings and feelings after watching an experimental drama in France, they said they were totally confused by the drama; however, their French counterparts were excited by their answers, and they replied:

Actually speaking, we are not sure about what we are going to tell you, and the characteristic of the experimental/avant-garde art is to let the audience become the creator, so that what the viewers feel is what we want to express. (Sohu Web 2007)

Meng's dramas clearly bear the characteristic of avant-garde artistic creation which "exalt the unconscious and emotional side of human nature" and "provide an antidote to a civilization that almost exclusively emphasizes the rational and intellectual" (Innes 1993: 10). These uncertainties, and the openness that Meng and his colleagues generate, create an enormous space for the viewers to develop their own imaginings, which then further enhances their ability to identify with and realize their own individualities and subjectivities. Critic Bai Ling argues that "[t]he unique success of Meng Jinghui is actually the result of the inexorable trend of the current Chinese society in which the value system of people is undergoing a shift from singing the praises of collectivism

to the admiration of the grassroots heroes [the common people]" (Zichang Web 2005). Here, in this quote, "collectivism" indicates the fixed and unanimously agreed way of thinking, whereas the grassroots heroes signify the newly emerged, multi-perspective world value, which nurtures the formation of a real subjectivity and a Chinese postmodern trend.

### Concluding Remarks

Meng Jinghui's avant-garde drama experiments mark a watershed in the history of contemporary Chinese theatre. His innovative use of multiple theatrical languages and apparatus and his bold employment of popular culture elements, which I have labeled Meng Jinghui's "avant-garde postmodernism," are central in displaying a postmodern ethos in the experimental theatre circle in terms of questioning and challenging those modernist epistemes and meta-narratives, such as rationalism, moralism, dualism, or socialism. Meng's dramas are a convergence of popular culture, the avant-garde, and postmodern characteristics. In this way, his style is rather more critical, unconventional and challenging than compromising and eclectic. Meng's plays contain an uncompromising and rebellious nature, especially focused on interrogating the Chinese modernity and its political, social, and cultural heritage. His work has the non-conformist and antagonistic ethos of both the avant-garde and the postmodern.

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