



Oriental fissures in the western canonical structure: Li Shutong and his aesthetical revolution against Chinese theatrical conventions

Lizhen Chen

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Lizhen Chen

School of International Studies, Hangzhou Normal University, Hangzhou, P. R. China

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the revolutionary power exerted on Chinese modern drama by Li Shutong (Master Hongyi, 1880–1942), the highly respected pioneer of modern drama and art in China. His work with the drama club Spring Willow Society revealed Li Shutong's effort to employ the formulae and formalities in Chinese drama to challenge western canonical power and established structures. Taking western drama as a tool to reform Chinese drama, he made use of Chinese and Japanese aesthetics to negotiate western theory in his political agenda of anticolonialism. Li Shutong's adaptation of *La Dame aux Camélias*, *The Black Slave's Cry to Heaven* (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*) and other western canonical works on the stage was an aesthetical activity as well as a political move to fight against the mainstream theatrical conventions in China. Meanwhile, he succeeded in providing an alternative to undermine western hegemonic power by his fusion of oriental elements into the western canons.

KEYWORDS

Li Shutong; modern drama; anticolonialism; aesthetics; revolution

Around the turn of the twentieth century, China suffered from famine, flood, uprisings, and foreign invasions. A series of crushing military defeats warned the ancient empire that there was a dire urgency for reform and modernization. Peer pressure from neighboring countries justified this need in an evident way. The victory in the Russo-Japanese War (1904–05) marked the emergence of Japan as a leading military power in Asia, testifying to the success of its endeavors of westernization and modernization after the Meiji Restoration of 1868. Japan turned into a breeding ground for revolution in China and a bridge to western culture. In this political and historical milieu, many Chinese intellectuals were enthusiastic about the notion of 'Western learning for application, Chinese learning for essence.' It was first put forward by Feng Guifen (1809–1874), scholar and social reformer, in 1861 and became widely known under the influence of Zhang Zhidong (1837–1909), the leader of the Self-strengthening Movement in China, and his book *China's Only Hope* (1898). As a counterpart cultural agenda of the politically and economically self-strengthening movement, artists in China started to reconsider the role of Chinese culture and arts. With great support from the emperors, Empress Dowager Cixi, aristocrats, intellectuals, and rich people, Peking Opera, which

CONTACT Lizhen Chen  chenleezhen@gmail.com  School of International Studies, Hangzhou Normal University, Hangzhou 311121, P. R. China

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was close to the status of ‘national drama’ in China, was at the height of its power at the beginning of the 20th century. It was situated at the top of the hierarchy of theatrical forms. The sign of change against the most dominating form of Chinese theatre appeared on 11 February 1907 in Tokyo, Japan, a place that is both distant from the geographical center of imperial power and from the influence of the performance market.

The challenge and disruptive force to Chinese theatrical forms all started with Li Shutong, a Chinese student in Japan, and his friends in the drama club, the Spring Willow Society. An adaptation of Alexandre Dumas fils’ *La Dame aux Camélias* was performed by them. The version of *La Dame aux Camélias* adapted by the Spring Willow Society was acknowledged to be the earliest production of western drama by Chinese people: ‘It was the first time that Chinese people ever performed a spoken drama in accordance with the aesthetic principles and theatrical forms of western drama’ (Huang 2004, 84). There has been a growing attempt to analyze the impact of Western and Japanese drama on Chinese theatre. In previous research, the emphasis was put on Li Shutong’s contribution to the move from traditional drama to modern drama in China, including the trait of hybridity in the performances (Liu 2013), the modernization of Chinese drama (Y. Chen 2013), the influence of the Japanese *shinpa* (Iizuka 2018), adaptation of western classics for the Chinese stage (Qi 2019), and the transnational and intercultural genetics of the performance cultures (Ferrari 2020). The focus of these studies is on the supremacy of Anglo-European theatrical ideas and rules regarding Chinese drama in the beginning years of the 20th century. Examining the historical context in a closer way, we will realize that when Li Shutong and Spring Willow Society staged *La Dame aux Camélias* and other plays in Tokyo, they did borrow from Anglo-European canonicity, but at the same time, they also decentered it with the force of Chinese and Japanese culture.

Oriental aesthetics as a decentring force in stage design

The concept of ‘oriental’ is complex. I will be using it in this article to signify both a contrast with the ‘West’ (another complex concept) and a circulating notion of theatre that moves from Japan to China. Even though some Chinese scholars in the period of the Spring Willow Society tended not to conflate China and Asia as a whole, it was still a common practice then in China to have a binary opposition between the east and the west. The leading intellectuals including Kang Youwei (1858–1927) and Liang Qichao (1873–1929) employed the notion of the ‘West’ or the ‘foreign’ as a political and cultural counterpart to the ‘oriental’ or the ‘Chinese’. This contrast could easily be noticed in their letters, articles and books. For a long time, the canonicity and dominance of western culture was readily accepted in China as a redeeming force to modernize traditional drama. It could be, nevertheless, problematic to say that this type of cultural and political inclination was a monolithic phenomenon. Many prominent scholars including Gu Hongming (1857–1928), Yan Fu (1854–1921), Liu Shipei (1884–1919) and even Hu Shi (1891–1962) had different attitudes towards cultural appropriation and ‘grabbism’, which was a term coined by Lu Xun (1881–1936), to criticize indiscriminate borrowing from other cultures. It was a fact, however, that the inclination to borrow western culture to strengthen China was a prevalent desire for Chinese scholars around 1900. This urge was testified by the fact that more and more students went to study in America, Europe and especially Japan which was close and convenient. According to an official

investigation revealed by *The Government Newsletter of Shandong (Shandong Guan Bao)*, there were 13,620 Chinese students studying in Japan in 1906 (*The Government Newsletter of Shandong*, 10 October 1906). Li Shutong was among them. Arriving in Tokyo in the autumn of 1905, he studied in a preparatory school of language. In September of 1906, he was recruited by the prestigious Western Painting Department of the Tokyo School of Fine Arts. In addition to music, painting, and poetry, he started to develop an interest in *shinpa*, a new form of drama in Japan. In the winter of that year, he initiated a drama club, the Spring Willow Society. It was the first modern drama club organized by Chinese people.

Raoul Birnbaum (2003, 77) was right in his evaluation of Li Shutong's enthusiasm for drama, noting that 'In surveying Li Shutong's accomplishments, it is important to bear in mind that in his era many artistic activities were framed as integral elements of an attempt at conscious transformation of Chinese society. Such activities were at the core of the modernizing project in the first decades of the twentieth century'. On 11 February 1907, the Spring Willow Society staged *La Dame aux Camélias* in Tokyo. The script of *La Dame aux Camélias* was based on Lin Shu's (1852–1924) Chinese translation of the novel, which was published in China at the beginning of 1899. Only two scenes (or arguably one scene) of Act III was performed on that day. It was meant to be the finale program of a fundraising party to support people suffering from a flood in China. The performance was therefore given in Chinese. The performance was reported in great detail by the *Eastern Times*, a pioneering Shanghai-based newspaper. According to the report given by an anonymous Chinese gentleman living in Tokyo, over 2000 people watched the performance. He was interviewed several days later by a Japanese journalist and was told that Japanese people greatly admired the performance and they were impressed by the appropriateness of the scenic design on the stage (*Eastern Times*, 20 March 1907). The success and groundbreaking significance of *La Dame aux Camélias* lies in many aspects. In addition to acting, Li Shutong was in charge of all the designing work including costumes, stage, furniture, props, sets and playbills.

On 10 May 1907, the Spring Willow Society published 'Declarations of the Spring Willow Society' in the Tianjin-based newspaper *L'Impartial (Da Gong Bao)*. It was written by Li Shutong and approved by all the members. In this document, Li Shutong made it clear that in recent years Europe, America, and Japan were the symbols of civilization. Chinese drama should be reformed in the western style. The Society would focus on the performance of western drama and reform Chinese drama by adopting scenes and scenery design from western drama (S. Li 2005, 45–47). The principles of the Society were substantiated on June 1 by the performance of *The Black Slave's Cry to Heaven (Uncle Tom's Cabin)* at Hongo-za Opera House in Tokyo, which was a famous venue for the rising new school drama style of *shinpa*. *La Dame aux Camélias* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were translated into Chinese by Lin Shu and published separately in 1899 and 1901. They were taken to be among the best of classic western literature. Their canonicity was immediately established in China. The popularity of these two novels reached Japan. Li Shutong and his friends of the Spring Willow Society greatly admired them for the exotic atmosphere and rebellious spirit.

Uncle Tom's Cabin was in fact the first full-fledged modern Chinese drama since the previous performance of *La Dame aux Camélias* only covered arguably two scenes. The performance was reported widely in Tokyo's newspapers, including *Tokyo Asahi*

Shimbun, *Tokyo Nichi Nichi Shimbun*, and *Yomiuri Shimbun*. According to these reports, Li Shutong was rather overshadowed by other actors in the performance (Nakamura 2004, 43), but his stage design was widely acknowledged as marvelous. The indoor settings and scenic design on the stage were made with oil painting. The Beijing-based *Shuntian Daily* (*Shuntian Ri Bao*) reported the performance consecutively from June 13 to 15. It described the scenery design in this way: ‘The background depicts the landscape and surroundings. Mountains, trees, and moss-covered stones are painted on the screen. They are as vivid as real existence. All are done by Li Shutong’ (*Shuntian Daily*, 13 June 1907).

Act IV was entitled ‘Moonlight in front of Tom’s Cabin.’ As a fusion of American subjects and Japanese style, the scenic design of the performance was radically different from traditional Chinese operas which only have a simple, symbolic, and abstract background for the setting of the stage, normally leaving the stage empty for the sake of performance. According to the description of the audience and critics, the scenery was a landscape that combined Chinese aesthetics and Japanese style painting: ‘The scenery and sound designed by Li Shutong are quite special. Uncle Tom’s cabin was situated on a wild and lonely field, covered by trees, and surrounded by fences. A crescent moon hung in a blue haze’ (Y. Li 1988b, 190). The script went through a drastic revision here. Extant reports about the performance show that several students played the role of Japanese drunkards. Chinese folk songs and dances were added to this scene (Wei 2014, 76–77). The scenery is a strange mixture of a Japanese style of pastoral life and an American theme of slavery. The actresses wore dreadlocks and African head wraps to represent women slaves. The original story of American slavery and religious piety is superimposed onto the codified forms of Japanese *shinpa* and Peking Opera. The fusion of oriental and Western elements produces an effect of aesthetical illusion on the audience. It borders on, in fact, the question of cultural appropriation. Nevertheless, for people living in that time, they barely recognized the controversial effects and the problem of political correctness. When Li Shutong and his friends staged *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in Tokyo in 1907, China was ruled by Emperor Guangxu (1871–1908) of Qing Dynasty, which was the last feudal regime in China. At that time, the dominant culture in China was definitely Confucianism, which emphasizes benevolence, righteousness and virtue. In an age of numerous military defeats and political failures, intellectuals held the idea that traditional cultural beliefs should give way to the political urge of national revival and independence. All the other cultural delicacies and considerations were subdued and subordinated to this great endeavor. The action of transplanting western cultural elements onto Japanese aesthetical tradition by a group of Chinese students achieves the effect of integrating these cultures. It leaves many ‘cracks’ and ‘fissures’, decentring the canonicity of French and American culture as well as the tradition of drama in China.

It was in Li Shutong’s power to take the position of stage designer since he majored in painting and art. He was strongly influenced by the famous Paris-trained painter Kuroda Seiki (1866–1924), who was then chair of the painting department. Kuroda Seiki combined the techniques of French academic art and Impressionism to create a new form of *plein air* painting, the Japanese style of Impressionism. According to a report in the Tokyo-based *Kokumin Shimbun* (‘The National Newspaper’), on 4 October 1906, a Japanese journalist went to interview Li Shutong in his apartment and found many

copies of Kuroda Seiki's paintings hanging there (Xia 2016, 1). Li Shutong was one of the earliest Chinese people to learn oil painting. Only a few of his oil paintings are extant now. All of them are finished in the style of Impressionism. Li Shutong was familiar with the French milieu of drama and techniques of Kuroda Seiki's Japanese style of Impressionism, which he used to design a detailed background scenery for the stage of *La Dame aux Camélias*.

Li Shutong designed the scenery of the stage in the style of Japanese drama. It was painted on cardboard models, which were wooden frames covered with paper. This was the standard practice in the theatrical trade of Japan. As a scenic designer, Li Shutong painted a visual presentation that blended oriental aesthetic taste with western landscape. From the pictures on two of the surviving souvenir postcards, we can see a scene of the performance on that day. Both of them show an implicit style of Impressionism and characteristics of Japanese art. One depicts the scene in which Marguerite lies on the bed, Armand reads a book in an armchair which is close to the fireplace, and Prudence sits in a chair waiting upon Marguerite. It is noticeable that the fireplace, the paintings, the vase, and the door are all painted on a piece of scenery. Naturally, all of them were painted very well in the European-Japanese style, since Li Shutong was highly commended for his painting and designing talents. Moreover, he graduated at the top of his class. The picture on another postcard shows a different scene, in which one sees Marguerite bowing down in anguish, another lady in white, and two different gentlemen, one wearing a top hat and smoking a pipe, the other standing in front of the armchair. The furniture is the same as in the previous picture, but the scenery is quite different. All the theatrical design, including scenery, costumes, makeup, stage, and backstage are done in the European-Japanese style. Li Shutong and his Spring Willow Society revised the story of the classic French novel and infused many Japanese and Chinese elements that suited the occasion of the performance.

Stylized conventions and hybridity of the theatre

The performance of *La Dame aux Camélias* was a success. It is not easy, however, for amateurs to recognize the excellence of Li Shutong's role of Marguerite. Ouyang (1959, 8), who joined the Spring Willow Society after watching this performance and later became a top star of Peking Opera and spoken drama in China, scorned Li Shutong for his 'poor makeup, tolerable voice, stiff expression and movements' in the performance. In this same autobiography, Ouyang (5–10) was candid about the fact that he did not know much about Peking Opera or performance and he was made fun of by other members of the Spring Willow Society. However, in the eyes of scholars and experts, Li Shutong's performance was stunningly good. Matsui shōō (1870–1933), a well-known drama critic, director, and *shinpa* and *shin kakubi* playwright in Japan, was reported to be among the audience. He published an article afterwards praising Li Shutong as the best performer and held: 'I would rather say that it was Li Shutong, instead of the troupe, that made the performance shine. The makeup was simple and perfect in the western style . . . the elegance and charm of Li Shutong are beyond the reach of any Japanese actors' (Chen 2001, 18). The disparity between the judgment of an amateur and that of a drama critic lies in the complexity of Li Shutong's negotiation

with the stylized conventions of Peking Opera and features of verbal communication in western drama and Japanese *shinpa*.

It is interesting to note the comment given by Ouyang (1959, 14) in his memory of this performance: 'He is very enthusiastic about drama, but he knows a little about (foreign) literature. He tends to find substance in the paintings and takes great pains to ensure the appropriateness of motions and gestures'. Ouyang was right in the sense that, like most Chinese intellectuals of his time, Li Shutong did not have a systematic and thorough knowledge of English literature. Nevertheless, he was greatly influenced by the acknowledged canonic power of western drama. He had at least an English version of *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*. The book was worn from overuse. When he was middle-aged and decided to become a monk, he sent his belongings to friends, and he told his former student Feng (1992, 147): 'I have read it very carefully and made a lot of notes. It is worn out, but you should have it as a souvenir'. In fact, the true reason for Li Shutong's emphasis on the appropriateness of motions and gestures lies in his cultural subconscious and historical memory of the stylized conventions of Peking Opera.

On 23 October 1880, Li Shutong was born into the family of a very rich merchant in Tianjin. His father died when he was only five years old. Li Shutong received his early education from his parents and elder brother. With Confucian analects, Buddhist sutras, poetry, music, painting, calligraphy, and seal carving, he was taught and meant to be a traditional Chinese scholar. With endless recitals, contrived formalities and strict rules, the process of training was harsh and painstaking. Even though he was a talented and dedicated student, he became dissatisfied with his studies. Around 1896, Li Shutong realized that the age of traditional and classical Chinese culture was gone and started to study mathematics and English, which were considered to be 'new' or 'foreign' knowledge at that time (Wu 2004, 11). The existing archives show that Li Shutong was highly dissatisfied with the political and educational system of his time, which can be proven by his articles filed for the preparation of the imperial examination for officials in 1902 and 1903. Nevertheless, Li Shutong had a natural inclination for drama, music, calligraphy, seal carving, and other Chinese traditional arts for a 'gentleman.' When he was twenty years old, he was universally acknowledged to be 'the most talented man in Tianjin' (Yao 1988, 309). There was a drama stage close to the house of Li Shutong's family. Very keen on Peking Opera, he made friends with opera stars including Sun Juxian (1841–1931), Yang Xiaolou (1878–1938), Liu Yongkui (1875–1942), and started to learn to perform.

Li Shutong moved to Shanghai in October of 1898. While staying there, he made a lot of friends in the field of theatrical performance and more importantly, he played the role of the main heroes in two Peking Operas: *Temple of Sacrifice (Ba La Miao)* and *White Water Beach (Bai Shui Tan)* (Su 1999, 5). The two operas, highly notable for their requisition for actor's martial arts skills and dramatic intensity, are among the most classic and popular repertoire of Peking Operas. Peking Opera has a rigid and standardized schema for actor's movements on the stage. It forms a tradition and hierarchy for the symbolic power of roles and repertoire. Li Shutong played two roles in *Temple of Sacrifice (Ba La Miao)*, which can be evidenced by two extant photos showing him in different costumes and makeup. Obviously, Li Shutong's theatrical skills were professional enough to be able to participate in commercial performances in Shanghai.

No copy or any detailed description of the script remains now except for some photos taken during and after the performance, a copy of the playbill, and a set of souvenir

postcards. Luckily, more archives are available in the case of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The *Eastern Times* gave a detailed account of this performance. According to the report, Li Shutong, acting the role of Emily Shelby, played piano during the performance in Act II. An Indian actor was arranged to sing the national anthem of India onstage. Mr. Haley, the slave trader, sang a song in the style of 'Er Huang,' a lyrical and peaceful tune of Peking Opera. In Act IV, Li Shutong played the role of a drunkard. He sang several songs. Three other drunkards sang high-pitched tunes of Peking Opera, accompanied by a Chinese two-stringed fiddle (Hu Qin) and Chinese flute (*Eastern Times*, 16 June 1907). Apparently, no Japanese or Chinese people ever appeared in the original novel written by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Li Shutong put symbols of Chinese and Japanese culture into the stage design. Xu (1957, 13), a famous drama actor, was a spectator at this performance. He wrote in his memoir: 'The setting of the stage was very impressive. The dialogues, expressions and movements were completely different from the style of Peking Opera. A new Chinese drama was born'. During one scene of a ball in Act II, 'the stage was crowded with Japanese, Indian, Korean, and Chinese people, everyone dressing in the style of his own country. They inserted an Indian Marquis and several Japanese into Act II. None of these roles ever appeared in the original novel. It was hilarious but bore no connection to the drama itself. More importantly, the music used for dance was Chinese tunes, which was really a specialty at that time' (Ouyang 1959, 11). It was obvious that the unrelated episodes were inserted into the play to reinforce the oriental aesthetics and appeal to the sentiments of the audience. A. C. Scott (1993) made an insightful comment in saying that 'the play's action was expanded with extraneous interludes to please Chinese tastes. A curtain and scenery added novelty of effect'.

Li Shutong and other Chinese students were greatly influenced by two forms of westernized Japanese theatrical practice: *shinpa* (new school drama) and *shingeki* (new drama). *Shinpa* was a hybrid drama form that combined kabuki and features of western drama. It flourished in the 1880's and 1890's in Japan. In 1906, Li Shutong was in close contact with the famous *shinpa* actor Kawakami Otojirō (1864–1911). Another renowned *shinpa* actor, Fujisawa Asajirō (1866–1917), instructed them on the performances of *La Dame aux Camélias*. The story and script of a Peking Opera are always based on history or adapted from classical Chinese novels. Most of the stories center on episodes of war, love stories, emperors, and heroes. Actors are required to perform in strict line with the script and libretto. Even though they can have personal style to have some variation of expression, their movements must follow established choreography. In addition to that, Peking Opera adopts a formal and archaic way of speaking which is far removed from the spoken language in daily life. With an emphasis on form, rhyme, and rhythm, its librettos are written with fixed rules for schemas. Singing, dancing, and acrobatics are the highlights of the performance. *Shinpa*, instead, tends to address recent political or cultural topics through dialogues of daily life.

It is noteworthy that during the two important performances, Li Shutong chose to play female roles. He insisted on crossgender performance. In Peking Opera, a male actor that specializes in playing the role of a female is termed as *dan*. With the necessity to imitate the voice, movements, appearance, expressions, and emotions of a woman, it is highly demanding to be a *dan* actor. On 14 April 1908, the Spring Willow Society staged a three-act drama called *Sheng Xiang Lian*. The *Shanghai Gazette* (*Hu Bao*) reported on the 'shinpa-style' performance in length on May 3. The *Eastern Times* repeated the news in

greater detail on May 5. In this performance, Li Shutong took on the role of a lady again. He designed the drama in a special way to make it a combination of poetry and painting. However, the audience failed to catch his points well. This time he received rather harsh critiques for his lack of femininity, which Ouyang (1959, 13–14) posits, possibly resulted in his loss of interest in drama. Soon afterwards Li Shutong switched his attention to the study of painting and quit the Spring Willow Society.

Anticolonialism in ethics and counter-movements in aesthetics

The first decade of the 20th century witnessed a period of drastic social change in China. The Qing Dynasty, the last imperial dynasty in China, was overturned by the revolution of 1911. It was still, however, a golden age for Peking Opera which replaced Kun Opera (Kunqu) and rose to be the most popular and preeminent form of Chinese drama at the end of the 19th century. The formal origin of Peking Opera can be dated back to the year of 1790, when the whole country tried every means to celebrate the 80th birthday of Emperor Qianlong (1711–1799). This form of drama was a combination of music, vocal performance, dance, martial arts, and acrobatics. Nevertheless, the growth and prosperity of Peking Opera in the nineteenth century was accompanied by major challenges from other local drama forms as well as a marginal and minor challenge from the west.

The unexpected defeat in the First Opium War (1840–1842) and subsequent treaties forcefully opened China and brought western settlers to the ancient imperial country. The era of semi-colonial and semi-feudal society began. The political, ideological, and cultural formation of the western countries had a strong impact on the minds of Chinese people. Since then, there has been an omnipresent impulse to insist on the simple binary opposition of East vs. West, tradition vs. modernity, essence vs. application, etc. It is an oversimplification of the hybridity and interconnectedness of different cultures. Peking Opera, the most dominant genre of drama in China, met with external cultures and forces of modernity from the west as well. Western drama, performed by western settlers, first appeared in Shanghai as early as the 1850's. Lyceum Theatre, the first western-style theatre, was founded in 1866 by British expatriates. Almost all the performers and audience being foreigners, it exerted a negligible influence on the Chinese community. Around this time, college students also started to imitate the western style theatrical practices. Confined to campuses, their informal performances were quite marginal to the local residents of Shanghai as well.

As a young man, Li Shutong was greatly influenced by the political and cultural movement 'The Hundred Days of Reform,' which was led by the great scholar Kang Youwei (1858–1927) in 1898. Emperor Guangxu (1871–1908) approved the petition of the reformists and issued his reform decree on 11 June 1898. Kang Youwei led the intellectuals of his time to push the government to start the massive undertaking of strengthening the country and fighting against colonialism. According to the memoir of Li (1988a, 111), the second son of Li Shutong, his father once carved a seal bearing the words 'Disciple of Kang Youwei', which showed his involvement with the revolutionary force. After the failure of the reform movement in September, Li Shutong went to Shanghai, accompanied by his mother and wife. In the year of 1900, troops of the Eight-Nation Alliance invaded China to crack down on the Boxers. On his way from Shanghai to Tianjin in March of 1901, Li Shutong was shocked by the devastation caused by the

recent wars. He wrote patriotic poems and songs to record his anger at colonialism and love of his homeland. In the same year, he went to study at Nanyang College of Shanghai, a westernized modern university that was founded in 1896. During his two-year stay there, he studied the 'new style' western knowledge including English, Japanese, Latin, politics, economics, law, philosophy, mathematics, and diplomacy (Ou and Shen 2013, 8). Several years later, he went to study in Japan and testified to his patriotism by joining the Tong Meng Hui (Chinese Revolutionary League) in the winter of 1906.

Yu Shiao-ling cites the judgment of Chen Duxiu (1879–1842), the leading scholar and activist of the May Fourth Movement in 1919, to declare theatre as a big school for the world and actors as teachers of the people. Yu (2009, 2–3) points out: 'We can see that Chinese intellectuals emphasized the social function of drama rather than its artistic merit. This lopsided view of drama was prompted by a desire to use Western-style drama as a vehicle for modernizing China. For this reason, the Chinese students in Tokyo chose to stage *Uncle Tom's Cabin*'. The Spring Willow Society made a drastic change to the end of the story. The original novel ends with the emancipation of the slaves by the plantation owner George Shelby. Instead, their performance ended the story with slaves killing slave traders and running away. It was obvious that Li Shutong and his friends meant to fit the drama into the political climate of the Chinese people fighting against oppression and colonialism. The Spring Willow Society adapted the script of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to the needs of the revolutionary cultural agenda that suited the occasion when China was invaded by foreign troops at the beginning of the 20th century. They deleted the elements of Christianity and substituted them with nationalism and anticolonial sentiments.

In the *Eastern Times* there was a column entitled 'On Drama.' In the 6 May 1910 issue, an article introduced the curriculum of the drama and performance department in Tokyo. It started with a judgment: 'Performance is concerned with art. Drama is concerned with fine arts (painting)' (*Eastern Times*, 6 May 1910). On 3 November 1910, this column featured a comparison of the performance with an adaptation of Victorien Sardou's *La Tosca*. It summarized reports made by newspapers in Tokyo to support its argument with complacency and nationalism: 'When it comes to the performance of western drama, Chinese people can do better than Japanese in movements and expressions' (*Eastern Times*, 3 November 1910). The 'Chinese people' that were referred to in this article were the actors in the Spring Willow Society. They gave a performance of *La Tosca* in the spring of 1909 in Tokyo.

Immediately after the debut of the performance of *La Dame aux Camélias* in Tokyo, Li Shutong wrote a poem entitled 'Reflections after the Performance of *La Dame aux Camélias*,' which, in fact, was an exact recreation of his poem previously published in October of 1905 for the literary and theatric practice of the Literary Society of Shanghai (Hu Xue Hui). This poem is written in perfect classical Chinese style. It consists of eight lines, divided into two separate sections. The first half is a concise summary of the story of *La Dame aux Camélias*, expressed, of course, with the diction, allusions, and images in most typical Chinese style. The second half is tinged with thoughts about Buddhism and the ideal to use drama as a vehicle to arouse the patriotism of his people and save his homeland from foreign invaders.

Conclusion

As a towering figure in twentieth-century Chinese culture and a national icon, Li Shutong has played an indispensable role in the fashioning of Chinese national character. Li Shutong lived a legendary life full of great ups and downs: birth in a wealthy family, fame as a great talent, loss of parents in youth, study abroad in Japan, bankruptcy of the family, teaching arts in several colleges, and becoming a Buddhist monk in his middle age. He was a genius of art with astonishing versatility.

There is no doubt that Li Shutong was the soul of the Spring Willow Society. His contribution to the drama club and birth of Chinese modern drama lay both in his artistic talents as well as his financial support. As he came from a rich family and was strongly dedicated to art, he could afford to cover a very large portion of the expenses of the performances, including theater rental, costumes, set design, and other related costs. In addition to that, Li Shutong's performance and charisma attracted new members to join the Spring Willow Society, including, among many others, Zeng Xiaogu (1873–1937), Ouyang Yuqian (1889–1962), and Lu Jingruo (1885–1915). Even though Li Shutong quit the Spring Willow Society shortly after he established it, the other members continued his cause. Upon their return to China, they started professional western theatres, troupes, and training schools in Shanghai to compete with Peking Opera and other traditional Chinese dramas. The Spring Willow Society continued to exist for many years and found a new life in China with performances in Shanghai and Suzhou.

With the impact of modern western drama, even Peking Opera had to adapt itself to the changing situation. On 26 October 1908, a modernized and reformed Peking Opera theatre, *New Theatre* (Xin Wu Tai), was established to accommodate to the trend of modernizing the theatre. The emergent marginal form of western theatre began to engage with the central domain of traditional Chinese drama. It challenged, disrupted, and altered the hegemonic dominant position of Chinese drama. With the performance of *La Dame aux Camélias*, *The Black Slave's Cry to Heaven* (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*) and other western canonical works in Tokyo, Li Shutong and his Chinese student sojourners in Tokyo brought a new form of theatrical practice into the horizon of Chinese culture. Their experimentations with theatrical form and aesthetics initiated spoken drama, a major theatrical form in modern China. His commitment to challenging the 'western canon as authority' while simultaneously deploying Japanese modes of design and painting to transform the Chinese stage influenced subsequent generations of theatre-makers. Japanese *shinpa* and western canonical theatrical practices were assimilated into the theatrical performance of Peking Opera and gave birth to 'Civilized Drama' (Wenming Xi), the early form of modern spoken drama. This new type of hybrid theatrical form was termed 'Civilized Drama' because of its origin from Europe, America and Japan and other civilized countries. It paved the way for the great popularity of spoken drama. After the ups and downs of the 20th century, spoken drama has reached a mature and equilibrium state now, the western canonical ideas and Japanese theatrical practices being foregrounded and practices of Chinese operas being backgrounded. In this sense, Li Shutong and his Spring Willow Society made the sparks of western drama burst into a mighty flame that spread over China and became an important form of theatrical practice for many decades to come. Meanwhile, in his stage design and performances of *La Dame aux Camélias* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, he

made use of the hybridity of different dramatic forms. In this way, Li Shutong succeeded in undermining western hegemonic power by his fusion of oriental elements into the western canons.

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Notes on contributor

Lizhen Chen is Deputy Dean of the Academy of Sciences, professor of English Literature at School of International Studies, and research fellow at the Literary Criticism Institute of Hangzhou Normal University. His research interests focus on circulation of literary discourses, comparative literature and ethical literary criticism. He is the author of *Ethical Perspectives in the Narratives of Regency Novels* (Zhejiang University Press, 2020), *The Angel and the Dove* (China Social Sciences Press, 2018) and dozens of articles in journals including *Style*, *Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature* and *Foreign Literature Review*.

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