Eugene O'Neill's Affinity with China: A Two-way Influence

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Abstract

By exploring scholarships on Daoist (Taoist) tendencies in Eugene O'Neill and analyzing some of O'Neill's plays, this study shows that ancient Chinese Daoism once cast spiritual impact on O'Neill. Whereas through surveying some of Chinese modern spoken-drama and traditional opera theaters, the study also recaps that conversely O'Neill inspired and influenced prominent Chinese modern and contemporary dramatists over the course of the twentieth century, suggesting a two-way affinity between the American playwright and Chinese culture. Moreover, by analytically connecting O'Neill with a contemporary Chinese film produced in 2006, the study further reveals that O'Neill's inspiration and influence have continued in different Chinese cultural genres and beyond the twentieth century. Comparative studies like this are enticing because they help us understand better why writers or artists, Chinese or American, rapport with the same or similar motifs and structures for specific purposes or effects in a particular place and time.

Keywords: Eugene O'Neill, Daoism, Chinese spoken drama, traditional theater, Cao Yu, film, influence, Xu Fen

Introduction

If Shakespeare has been crossing national boundaries in the global art exchange, Eugene O'Neill seems to do the same in his relationship with Chinese culture. Exploring existing scholarships on O'Neill and those on O'Neill's influence upon Chinese drama, this study finds that O'Neill's affinity with China appears as a fascinating two-way influence. Furthermore, as the study analyzes, this affinity between O'Neill and China is cross-genre and enjoys greater longevity than imagined.

The fact that ancient Chinese Daoism (Taoism) once cast spiritual impact on one of the greatest American playwrights compellingly initiates revisits to and further examinations of Daoist tendencies in O'Neill's plays. Whereas through surveys of some Chinese theatrical works, including that of modern spoken-drama (*huaju*) and traditional *xiqu* opera, the study also recaps another fact that conversely O'Neill has inspired and influenced such prominent Chinese modern and contemporary dramatists as Hong Shen, Cao Yu, and Xu Fen. By connecting O'Neill with a Chinese film produced at the dawn of the twenty-first century, the study also reveals that O'Neill's inspiration and influence have continued in different Chinese cultural forms and genres and beyond the twentieth century.

As the following examinations and analyses demonstrate, the fruitfulness and significance of the reciprocal relationship between Eugene O'Neill and Chinese theater and film lie in various artistic aspects and at multiple levels.

DAOIST TENDENCIES IN EUGENE O'NEILL

"The O'Neills called their new home after the Chinese word tao [dao], which means 'the right way of life,' and on the heavy black doorway to their courtyard placed four wrought-iron symbols from Chinese calligraphy that spelled 'Tao House'" (Sheaffer, 1973, p. 472). The house described is the O'Neills' new retreat built in Contra Costa county, California, in 1936. It was in this isolated Tao House that O'Neill wrote *Long Day's Journey into Night*, a play portraying "the longing of the characters, singly and together, for a mystical union of sorts" (Bermel, 1979, p. 245), and *The Iceman Cometh*, a play showing the characters "trying to escape their consciousness of their pasts…by constructing pipe dreams" (Andreach, 1976, p. 103). The name of the house, its "Chinese interior," the playwright's inclination for privacy there, and the themes of the two major plays written there all indicate O'Neill's strong interest in Daoism, the ancient Chinese philosophical wisdom which, in its larger outlines, emphasizes an escape from the mundane world and the return to an ideal life of rural simplicity.

In fact, O'Neill maintained an increasing interest in Daoism and relevant Chinese culture throughout his career. As early as the 1920s, he acquainted himself with Daoism. At that time, his library contained the texts of Laozi (Lao Tzu) and Zhuangzi (Chuang Tzu), the two major Daoist (Taoist) thinkers (Robinson, 1982, p. 23). In his private life, apart from the building of the Tao House, O'Neill's interest in Daoism and Chinese culture was exhibited by the O'Neills' making friends with Chinese who lived in America, and by their taking a trip to China in 1928 following roughly the same route Marco Polo took (Frenz, 1979, pp. 5-6). Although the trip disappointed him—due to O'Neill's serious illness then and Shanghai's westernized urban characteristics, it did not destroy his interest in this Chinese wisdom. Rather, when giving information about his reading of Eastern religion and philosophy in a 1932 letter to the critic and English professor Frederic Carpenter, O'Neill confessed his interest in Daoism: "The mysticism of Lao-tzu [Laozi] and Chuang-tzu [Zhuangzi] probably interested me more than any other Oriental writing" (O'Neill, 1988a, p. 401).

The reason that O'Neill was so preoccupied with Daoism could be explained by his fascination with mysticism. It is common knowledge that O'Neill was enchanted with mystical faiths throughout his life. In a letter to the critic Arthur Hobson Quinn, O'Neill labelled himself as "a most confirmed mystic" and continued: "I'm always acutely conscious of the Force behind—(Fate, God, our biographical past creating our present, whatever one calls it—Mystery certainly)" (Quinn, 1927, p. 199). More by indication than by direct statement, O'Neill spoke of his mysticism at many other times. To a great extent, O'Neill's mysticism was, as O'Neill scholars point out, originated by his religious background and personal need. At the age of fifteen O'Neill left the Catholic Church; once he repudiated his Catholic faith he never returned to it. Although the personal God to him did not exist anymore, he was still concerned with the ultimate; what he was interested in was still "the relation between man and God" (Krutch, 1959, p. xvii). This God had to be a mystical ultimate state.

O'Neill's search for a mystical faith led him not only to Occidental thoughts but also to Eastern religion and philosophy among which was Daoism. A philosophical system, Daoism pertains to China. Daoism is based upon *dao* (tao), a fundamental principle. Laozi (Lao Tzu) believed that there is an ultimate unity of the universe which is the constant *dao*. Unlike the Western supreme being—God, this Daoist ultimate is an impersonal state. The literal meaning of the *dao* is "road" or "way." But the Daoist concept of the *dao* is mysterious. According to Laozi, the *dao* is undefined: "The Tao [Dao] that can be Told /Is not the True Tao [Dao]; /Names that can be Named /Are not True Names. /The Origin of Heaven and Earth /Has no Name. /The mother of the Myriad Things /Has a Name" (Lao-tzu, 2018, p. 1). As the ultimate unity of the universe, mysteriously formless and constant, the *dao* governs both human beings and natural matters. Moreover, the *dao* in Daoism is often connected and compared to the concept of *yin*, the power of weakness, symbolized by female images; and, what is equally important, the *dao* is, like a circle, the beginning and end of all existence.

Daoist ideas cast remarkable light on O'Neill's mystical vision of reality. This was strongly manifested in a certain part of his drama. In his creative career, O'Neill literally mentioned China, East, and, as An Min Hsia notices, appropriated Daoist ideas like the cyclic movement in plays such as *Beyond the Horizon* where the playwright mentions the East and Robert Mayo in the play welcomes death as his beginning, *The Fountain* in which the image of the fountain contains the cyclic concept—surging upward but coming back to "kiss" the earth, and *Lazarus Laughed* expressing "a wish to return to a 'speck of dust' out of which man first came into existence" (Hsia, 1984, p. 173). His *Marco Millions* is set in medieval China and explicitly shows the conflict between Western materialism and Eastern spirituality. Moreover, according to James Robinson, O'Neill "recurrently toyed with the idea of writing a play about an ancient Chinese emperor, Shih Huang Ti [Shi Huangdi], and read books on Chinese history with this in mind" (Robinson, 1982, p. 23). Two plays, *Strange Interlud*e (1928) and *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956 posthumously), are considered by this author two most telling cases in the O'Neill corpus which embody some important Daoist concepts, as illustrated in the following analytical pages.

Strange Interlude is a lengthy play centering around Nina Leeds, daughter of a professor of classics in a small town of New England, who is devastated by the loss of her fiancé in World War I at the beginning of the play. Predominantly in the play, Nina clames God as a Mother: "I am living a dream within the great dream of the tide…breathing in the tide I dream and breathe back my dream into the tide…suspended in the movement of the tide, I feel life move in me, suspended me…no whys matter…there is no why…I am a mother…God is a mother" (O'Neill, 1988b, p. 38). This is Nina Leeds' speech when she is pregnant in act 5 of *Strange Interlude*. The speech is full of tranquility, poetic and mysterious. Its rhythm of the sea tide and sense of unreality correspond to the cyclical rhythm of Daoism, and, what is more important, Nina's proclamation of a Mother God is associated with a genuine Daoist notion, the Great Feminine. To a large extent, this speech epitomizes the theme of the play: a woman's search for her fulfillment. To make *Strange Interlude* a "woman's play," O'Neill puts four men to fulfill biological roles in Nina's life: Marsden as father, Evans as husband, Darrell as lover, and Little Gordon as son. Thus in the character of Nina, emerges a predominant female. This

female, like a mother god, symbolizes the Great Feminine of Daoism. In *Daodejing* (Tao Te Ching), the image of female is an important one: "The Valley Spirit never Dies. /The Mystic Feminine, /The Gate of the Mystic Feminine, /The Root of Heaven and Earth, /Like a soft silken fiber, /Can be used without end" (Lao-tzu, 2018, p. 6). As a female, Nina not only suffers compunction over her failure to have sexual relations with Gordon Shaw, her fiancé, but also loses her hope to be a mother. Because of this, Nina realizes she is not herself yet and intuits that she should make use of her life "by giving it" (O'Neill, 1988b, p. 45). Psychologically, Nina emerges on the stage as a newly-born, restless female who has yet to fulfill the purpose of her existence.

As Nina's father symbolizes in some way the Christian God that is Father God, interfering and associating with sexual repression and guilt, Nina symbolizes the Great Feminine, a Daoist God that is Mother God, flexible and transcendent over moral codes. While Laozi negatively views the achievements of traditionally male-dominant Chinese civilization, Nina traces the cause of man's suffering to the father god: "The mistake began when God was created in a male image. Of course, women would see Him that way, but men should have been gentlemen enough, remembering their mothers, to make a God a woman! But the God of Gods—the Boss—has always been a man. That makes life so perverted, and death so unnatural;" and to find a remedy, Nina feels that we "should have imagined life as created in the birth-pain of God the Mother," and therefore we "would know that our life's rhythm beats from Her great heart," and we "would feel that death meant reunion with Her" (O'Neill, 1988b, p. 47). Contrasted with the hard and powerful Father God, Nina's Mother God corresponds to what Laozi says in *Daodejing*: "Know Man, /Cleave to Woman. /Be a Ravine /For All-under-Heaven, /With Constant Power /That never fades. /Return Home /To the Infant" (Lao-tzu, 2018, p. 97). As indicated here, the biological imagery of the womb dominates images of the *dao* in Daoism. Based upon this Daoist belief, Laozi values human sexuality as the creative means that represents the interaction of *yin* and *yang* and therefore represents the *dao*. It is under this mystical influence of Daoist Mother God that Nina transcends moral codes. That is, Nina indiscriminately offers herself to "crippled" soldiers for her motherly instinct, calmly arranges Ned's remaining her lover while Sam is her husband, and after all triumphantly has her baby by her lover Ned and makes her husband happy and successful.

The highly autobiographical play *Long Day's Journey into Night* philosophically displays a retreat of all the four Tyrone family members—James and Mary and their sons Jamie and Edmund—from their present existence in their seaside cottage during a "long day." This sort of passive resignation bears a similarity to another important Daoist concept *wuwei*, meaning inaction. The dramatic tension of the play changes little; throughout the play, the Tyrones are all trapped by their past events. Consequently, the further the Tyrones move into night during their long day's journey, the more deeply they sink themselves in their past. Towards the end all "become resigned to the futility of any effort to escape" the past (Robinson, 1982, p. 173). Thus, when James Tyrone urges Mary, his wife, to forget the past, she responds: "How can I? The past is the present, isn't it? It's the future, too. We all try to lie out of that but life won't let us" (O'Neill, 1988c, p. 765). Since the past is the present, and even the future, any positive action is doomed to be a failure for changing the present reality. For the Tyrones, therefore, the feasible approach to the present life is to withdraw.

The Tyrones' passive detachment corresponds to the Daoist concept of inaction. The Daoist views life and death as matters of indifference and thinks there is no reason to mourn the deceased. He believes that the preservation of one's nature is the highest value and that the self-preservation is possible only by refraining from activity. As Zhuangzi (Chuang Tzu) says: "As long as there is inaction, he may rest in the true form of his nature and fate" (Zhuangzi, 2013, p. 75). This passive stance to existence permeates the play, emerging early and increasing along with the dramatic tension in *Long Day's Journey into Night*. Collectively and individually, the four members of the Tyrone family dissipate in consuming the hard liquor and drugs, each of them follows their recalls in detail. In their past, which mingles mistakes, vices, and moments of happiness, they see their own original nature and try to preserve it. For example, there is a Mary in her girlhood with virginal innocence, a James for whom the theater is a refuge from poverty, an Edmund with romantic idealism that is expressed in terms of blissful intoxication, and a Jamie who drinks to hide "his deep disappointment in life and in himself behind a mask of cynicism" (Schvey, 1980, p. 87). Once they see their original nature, they become passionless and indifferent, all moral judgements becoming unimportant. In this state one is transcendent and selfless. Through the contemplation of memorizing and forgetting, understanding and forgiving their past, and through drugs and alcohol—the Tyrone type of inaction, all of the Tyrones are in the realm of "Hundun:" the past is the present and the present is the past; there is no distinction between the two. From a Daoist perspective, this realm is one of nonbeing—as the Daoist proverb goes, the emperor of the central region named Hundun died while his friends tried to bear orifices onto his formless body (Zhuangzi, 2013, p. 59). Structurally, the Daoist *wuwei* or inaction is not only manifested in the alcoholism of the play but also in the long pauses which punctuate the action, or rather the inaction of the play.

While inaction is the main Daoist manifestation in association with the theme of *Long Day's Journey into Night*, the play provides us with examples that demonstrate another Daoist tendency in O'Neill's characterization of his characters in the play. In his speech while drunk in act 4, Jamie discloses to Edmund his vacillation between brother love and jealous hatred of Edmund: "Nix, Kid! You listen! Did it on purpose to make a bum of you. Or part of me did. A big part. That part that's been dead so long. That hates life…. Never wanted you succeed and make me look even worse by comparison. Wanted you to fail. Always jealous of you. Mama's baby, Papa's pet! … But don't get wrong ideas, Kid. I love you more than I hate you. My saying what I'm telling you now proves it…. What I wanted to say is, I'd like to see you become the greatest success in the world. But you'd better be on your guard. Because I'll do my damnedest to make you fail. Can't help it" (O'Neill, 1988c, pp. 820-821).

The conflicting emotion within Jamie seemingly mingles two moral oppositions: good and evil. Recognizing that he cannot eliminate either of them, Jamie then attempts to reconcile his jealous hatred with his love. Jamie's natural attitude towards his emotional conflict is basically a Daoist duality of *yin* and *yang* rather than a Western dualism in which everything is separated and there is little room for compromise with one another. Apparently, the two forces within Jamie described above have been interacting each other since the brothers' childhood. And Jamie's balancing them within himself in the play comes in line with Zhuangzi's words: "Joy, anger, grief, delight, worry, regret, fickleness, in-flexibility, modesty, willfulness, candor, insolence—music from empty holes, mushrooms springing up in dampness, day and night replacing each other before us, and no one knows where they sprout from" (Zhuangzi, 2013, p. 8).

Sometimes O'Neill applied this Daoist duality with distortions or blended it into Western dualism. In *Marco Millions*, for instance, O'Neill developed a twisted Daoist duality to epitomize the contrast between Marco's materialism and Kukachin's (Emperor Kublai Khan's granddaughter) spirituality. As James Robinson points out: "The dualistic opposition between Kukachin and Marco Polo… [is] prominent in the moral absolutism of American melodrama and reinforced by O'Neill's reading of Emerson, Jung, and Taoist [Daoist] texts" (Robinson, 2007, p. 103).

However strong his interest in Daoism was and its influence on him could be, O'Neill's Daoism, as shown in the discussions above, is more symbolic than overt. It is "more personal in origin, and more temperamental in expression. Moreover, it was much less concerned with facts and with actions, and it was more concerned with internal feelings and attitude" (Carpenter, 1982, p. 43). As the Daoist is always concerned with human beings' intuition with the *dao*, O'Neill was always concerned with human beings' primary emotions. Although, being one of the greatest American dramatists, O'Neill could hardly accept Daoism unreservedly and most of his plays remain in Western philosophical and theatrical heritages, his plays bearing Daoist characteristics prove the influence and fortification cast by this Chinese philosophy on his Western dramatic vision and creativity.

O'NEILL'S INFLUENCE ON CHINESE THEATERS AND CINEMA

The early stages of the modern Chinese spoken drama in the 20th century—the so-called spoken drama (*huaju*) was a new, Western-styled dramatic form different from traditional Chinese operas—witnessed a few explicit and significant borrowings from Eugene O'Neill by Chinese playwrights in their apprenticeship and, for some, throughout their creative career. Thus, a two-way influence came into view in terms of O'Neill's affinity with Chinese culture. O'Neill's actual fascination with Daoism and his subtly blending it into his Occidental views and dramatic works might become appealing to modern Chinese spoken drama playwrights and evoke in them some sort of familiar socio-cosmological outlook. It was certainly, however, O'Neill's unfamiliar Occidental ideologies indebted to such major European thinkers as Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, and Carl Jung, and his modern theatrical techniques mixed with heritages from Greek tragedies and Elizabethan theater that inspired and influenced Chinese playwrights. These spoken drama playwrights, while experimenting with the new Western-styled drama in the May Fourth era when "Western literature enjoyed an enormous popularity among the new intellectual class" (McDougall and Louie, 1997, p. 37), were seeking modernist ways to express their concerns with the lack of humanity in Chinese culture and society.

As recorded in modern Chinese literary history, one of the first adaptations of O'Neill's play *The Emperor Jones* (1920) in modern Chinese spoken drama was *Zhao Yanwang* (Yama Chao), produced in 1922 by Hong Shen, a pioneering spoken drama playwright and filmmaker present in the May Fourth cultural movement. Hong's was followed by a second but far more important Chinese reworking—especially in the expressionist techniques, *Yuanye* (The Wilderness), produced in 1937 by Cao Yu, one of the most influential figures in modern Chinese theater. Hong Shen's *Yama Chao* is about a bodyguard to the commander of a battalion who, after killing a fellow soldier for his payroll money, escapes into the jungle where he is psychologically tortured by various hallucinations and eventually shot to death by the chasing squad. Although it tells a Chinese story, *Yama Chao*, as David Chen argues, is "a Chinese version of *The Emperor Jones*. It has borrowed from its American prototype the money motif, the structure of plot, the

scene division, and the psychological treatment of hallucinations in a forest setting" (Chen, 1966, p. 432). Whereas Cao Yu's *The Wilderness* tells the story about a young farmer Chouhu's revenge on the enemy of his family after his eight years of undeserved imprisonment, as well as his reunion with his former fiancée Jinzi—now the enemy's daughter-in-law; after slaying a wrong person in his revenge, Chaohu and Jinzi escaped into the jungle where he experienced psychological tortures and eventually killed himself. Although Cao's spoken drama play "adopts the form and technique from its prototypes with so much flexibility that it works out a pattern of its own" (Chen, 1966, p. 435), striking histrionic traits of O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* are obvious.

Some of these traits are keenly noticed by Joseph Lau when comparing it to the O'Neill play: "Cast in the background of primordial jungles, both plays dramatize the psychic terror of two escaped convicts hounded by a guilty past. But unlike most of the previous works by these two writers, these two plays belong to a distinctly different category of drama in that their success as theater depends almost exclusively upon ingenious skill in technical interpretation. Unless imaginatively directed and acted, supported by effective sound and light effects, both plays can become meaningless monologues because their actions, rather than coming into full view of the audience, take place in the memories of the heroes" (Lau, 1970, p. 51). And in terms of Cao Yu's indebtedness in *The Wilderness* to O'Neill's expressionistic techniques in *The Emperor Jones*, the Chinese playwright acknowledged it as follows: "Writing the third act was comparatively troublesome; in it there are two devices, one of the sound of a drum, and the other gunfire at the ends of two of the scenes, which I took from O'Neill's *Emperor Jones*…. I suddenly discovered that unconsciously I had been influenced by him" (Rand, 1980, p. xxvii).

Among major attributions of foreign ancestry to Cao Yu's another representative and most popular play *Leiyu* (Thunderstorm) first published in 1934, as pointed out by scholars of modern Chinese literature, was O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* (McDougall and Louie, 1997, p. 178). In terms of literary historians' claim of O'Neill's influence upon Cao Yu, apart from textual evidence, the validity of it also lies in the fact that Cao Yu was majoring in English literature at Qinghua (Tsing Hua) University in Beijing from 1929-1933 and read extensively in Western literature. *Thunderstorm* is a melodrama that blends incest with generational revolt, political drama of class struggle, predestined fate, and bloody revenge. The major incestuous relationship of it can be summarized as such: Zhou Fanyi, the neurasthenic wife of Zhou Puyuan, a wealthy coalmine owner in north China, has a forbidden love relation with her stepson Zhou Ping who, after a period of illicit romance with her, abandons her and courts a house maid Sifeng without knowing she is his half-sister. The play ends with Fanyi's own son Zhou Chong and Sifeng dying by accident in the thunderstorm, Zhou Ping committing a suicide, and Fanyi and Shiping—Zhou Puyuan's former mistress and mother to Zhou Ping—incarcerated in an asylum; the male protagonist Zhou Puyuan is left surveying his ruined life—that is, he loses his women and children.

Apparently, there is a parallel between Cao's *Thunderstorm* and O'Neill's *Desire under the Elms* which plays out a family's unspeakable relationship in New England in 1850. The old farmer Ephraim Cabot brings home a young wife Abbie Putnam who finds herself having passion for Eben Cabot, her husband's son by his second marriage. Eben resists at first his stepmother's advances but eventually succumbs to Abbie's seduction. By sacrificing the life of an infant, the baby son of Abbie and Eben's transgression—when Abbie finds that she loves Eben more than the farm for which she got married in the first place, she smothers her infant to convince Eben her genuine love for him, *Desire under the Elms* ends with an unresolved questioning of the interplay between human desire and ethical prohibition. Outwardly, *Desire under the Elms* "re-enacts many of the tragic incidents of the old Greek myths. As in Oedipus, the son fights the father, and commits adultery (technically incest) with the mother (in this case, the step-mother)" (Carpenter, 1979, p. 103). And for that, the play was initially blamed for its darkness and appallingness. On his defensive, O'Neill had this to say: "I have been accused of unmitigated gloom. Is this a pessimistic view of life? I do not think so. There is a skin deep optimism and another higher optimism, not skin deep, which is usually confounded with pessimism. To me, the tragic alone has that significant beauty which is truth. It is the meaning of life—and the hope" (qtd in Caputi, 1966, p. 447). Indeed, there are clashes of desire and violence in O'Neill's play that recall Greek myths. But ending the play without sanctions to the violent actions such as infanticide conducted by Abbie Putnam, O'Neill conveys the theme of his modern play—that is, human beings' "desire," a libidinal force that symbolizes the rebellious spirit for his time in the Nietzschean sense, is irresistible and transcendent.

The indebtedness of Cao Yu's *Thunderstorm* to O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* lies partially in Cao's transforming Western age-old adultery and incest motifs into his new audacious Chinese themes. Both the Chinese patriarchal family system represented in *Thunderstorm* and the nineteenth-century Puritanist American farms represented in *Desire Under the Elms* are tyrannical and stifling, treating women coldly as commodities. As a result, the figure of the patriarch, Zhou Puyuan in *Thunderstorm* and Ephraim Cabot in *Desire under the Elms*, "destroys what he most wishes to extend,

the family line;" and in both plays, "the means of destruction is incest, the gravest possible sin against the family" (McDougall and Louie, 1997, pp. 178-179). Partially, Cao Yu's indebtedness to O'Neill lies in his characterization of his tragic or pseudo-tragic heroes based on O'Neill's play. For example, the character of Zhou Fanyi, the wealthy coalmine owner's wife, was modeled on Abbie Putnam in her defiant spirit, as Joseph Lau points out:

Of all the characters in *Thunderstorm*, Chou Fan-yi [Zhou Fanyi] has perhaps the closest resemblance to the traditional tragic hero, for like Abbie Putnam in O'Neill's *Desire under the Elms*, she is essentially a woman of passion, though the nature of their passion and the manner they react to it are characteristically different. And like Abbie, Fan-yi [Fanyi] has her own freedom of will; in other words, as far as their personal destinies are concerned, they have at least enough freedom to determine their own fates (Lau, 1970, p. 8).

Above all, O'Neill's communication—by portraying modes of unholy lust and infanticide in *Desire under the Elms*—of a Nietzschean viewpoint that human beings' desire alone can enable them to transcend themselves, most compellingly influenced Chinese modern playwrights like Cao Yu who belonged to the May Fourth literary generation and were characteristic of iconoclastic attack on Chinese tradition and advocation for emancipation of individuals from fetters of feudalism. This ironic thematic concern is profoundly moving and has made Cao Yu's *Thunderstorm* become the most performed play in the history of modern Chinese drama ever since its successful stage premiere in 1936. There were quite a few different film adaptations of the play made in the 1930s, 1980s and 1990s respectively; this record was topped by a 2003 reproduction in the popular form of TV series.

Tracing the genealogy of O'Neill's direct influence of *Desire under the Elms* on such Chinese spoken drama plays as *Thunderstorm* tells us why Chinese modern dramatists represented by Cao Yu and Hong Shen were so fond of Eugene O'Neill: "Tied though it is to the themes of oppression and hypocrisy in antiquated Chinese society, *Thunderstorm* is, in essence, an adaptation of a Western dramatic and intellectual tradition, with the intent of illuminating China's infirmities and resolving personal anxieties. Ts'ao [Cao] Yu seemed to be searching beyond immediate debilities for dark, universal energies affecting human behavior, while yet highlighting the concrete circumstances of China's present" (Rand, 1980, pp. xiii-xiv).

If O'Neill inspired his contemporary Chinese playwrights in the first half of the twentieth century, he "has been hailed in China as one of the world's greatest playwrights" since the 1980s, and his *Desire under the Elms* "has repeatedly captured the hearts of Chinese theatre artists" (Zhu and Liu, 2009, p. 4). The reported O'Neill fever in China since the 1980s has happened not only to contemporary modern spoken-drama theater, but more significantly to traditional Chinese operatic (*xiqu*) theater. According to O'Neill scholars in China, for instance, O'Neill's *Desire under the Elms* has been adapted twice into traditional Chinese theatre in the late 1980s—respectively into Sichuan opera called *chuanju* and Henan *qu* opera (*henan quju*) (Zhu and Liu, 2009, p. 3). Moreover, new Chinese translations of O'Neill plays such as that of *Desire under the Elms* reinforce the American playwright's popularity in China in the domain of world literature where he is ranked with James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, as well as Aeschylus and Shakespeare (Zhu and Liu, 2009, p. 4).

Thematically, O'Neill's tragic vision in *Desire under the Elms* enlightened post-Mao Chinese dramatists who were seeking new perspectives to subvert the existing character of the nation's consciousness of history and reform the traditional *xiqu* theater. Apparently, human beings' "irresistible desire" and defiant spirit O'Neill conveys in *Desire under the Elms* became inspirational and enlightening for Chinese artists in their interrogating the reasons for the lack of humanities in society and culture in the Maoist age (1949-1976) and questing for humanity in life and art in the 1980s. While expressing her appreciation of O'Neill's influence, Xu Fen, one of the dramatists devoted to Chinese traditional theater, confesses: "China still needs enlightenment. It is important for us to understand life and ourselves, and to confront the dark side of human life and human nature with courage" (qtd in Zhu and Liu, 2009, p. 4). A result of Xu's affinity with O'Neill is her 1989 adaptation of *Desire under the Elms* into the local *chuanju* theater titled *Yu hai kuang chao* (Raging Tides of a Sea of Desire)—a mixture of O'Neill's New England farm in the 1850s with a Chinese domestic saga against an unidentified ancient feudal era. Xu's adapted perspective is "a dualistic view of desire and its role in our spiritual and emotional life," as indicated with the song sung by the additional character named Desire: "If there's nothing you desire, /What life are you to lead? /If there's nothing but desire, /What is life itself indeed" (qtd in Zhu and Liu, 2009, p. 5)?

Stylistically, Xu Fen's adaptation of *Desire under the Elms* to the theater of *chuanju* was a huge success—in which modern American theatrical elements are integrated into traditional Chinese theatrical forms of the local *xiqu* theater featuring highly stylized stage directions and highly patterned performances of singing and action with minimum of speaking and decor. Thanks to the latter's features, however, it has been difficult for any traditional Chinese *xiqu* theater to adapt a Western play cohesively, making it anew in Chinese style. The possibilities that O'Neill has been

well received and borrowed into Chinese theatrical genres, including spoken-drama and traditional theaters, may be that modernist theatrical rhetoric applied in his plays—such as the symbolism of the tall elms in *Desire under the Elms*—can be effectively transformed to Chinese theaters via intrinsic techniques therein, such as the highly symbolic *bian lian* (masks changing) in *chuanju*. The possibilities also lie in that O'Neill's plays are more performance-oriented—that is, they become greater on stage. As Harold Bloom insightfully points out: "Sophocles, Shakespeare, and Moliere are masters alike of language, but O'Neill is mastered by language and relies instead upon a drive-towards-staging that he appears to have learned from Strindberg. Consider the close of *Long Day's Journey*. How much of the power here comes from what Tyrone and Mary say, and how much from the extraordinarily effective stage directions" (Bloom, 2007, p. 4)? This characteristic—well designed stage directions—of O'Neill's plays is, as this author believes, especially suitable for adaptation by the traditional Chinese *xiqu* theater whose performances of events and expressions of emotions are perceived through highly patterned, stylized articulations of acting.

While O'Neill's dramatic theme and vision have cast huge impact on modern Chinese playwrights and traditional Chinese theater artists such as Hong Shen, Cao Yu, and Xu Fen over the course of the twentieth century, as this study finds, they may still be in rapport with contemporary Chinese culture in the twenty-first century when descendant writers and artists are continuously questing for humanity. Zhang Yimou's feature film *Man cheng jin dai huangjinjia* (Curse of the Golden Flower) produced in 2006, provides a great case for our exploration of descendant artistic works in other cultural genres that reflect cross-cultural characteristics of the thematic, aesthetic, and technical exchanges between O'Neill and Chinese theaters. As *Thunderstorm*'s transgression scenario echoes that of *Desire under the Elms*, Zhang Yimou—who was well known for his fetishism of filmic transgression starting with his directorial debut film *Red Sorghum* (1987)—considered directly adapting Cao Yu's *Thunderstorm* while working out the transgression scenario of his film-to-be *Curse of the Golden Flower*. (Wang, 2007, p. 19) At the Los Angeles Premiere of *Curse of the Golden Flower*, Zhang Yimou spoke clearly of his borrowing from Cao Yu: "The film is actually adapted from a very famous stage play in the 1920s and 1930s called *Thunderstorm*, which is a very powerful story, very dramatic. And I've always loved it, and the interpersonal tensions that are revealed in that story are something I thought we could really tackle with this film" (Zhang, 2007a).

Supported with a big budget and later a box-office bonanza, *Curse of the Golden Flower* has been taken by film critics as a formulated historical "tragedy replete with martial arts" (Barboza, 2007). Based upon *Thunderstorm*, but with selection and distortion, *Curse of the Golden Flower* has a very similar transgression scenario: Empress Phoenix, the outwardly obedient yet actually rebellious second wife of Emperor Ping, a man of humble origins but strong ambition, has a forbidden love affair with her stepson, Crown Prince Wan, the son from Emperor Ping's previous marriage. Having engaged in the illicit relation with the Empress for three years, the Crown Prince abandons her and courts, without his knowledge that she is his half-sister, a palace maid named Jiang Chan, daughter of the Imperial Doctor. In the end, except the Emperor and Empress, all involved in the "dark" and illicit relationships are either killed or murdered, including the wife of the Imperial Doctor, Chan's mother who turned out to be the Emperor's first wife and Crown Prince Wan's biological mother; Prince Jie, the second son and symbol for filial piety in the film, commits a suicide after a failed military coup to overthrow the emperor on behalf of his maltreated mother. The Empress survives but becomes almost insane, assumably awaiting a complete mental collapse; and the Emperor is left, doomed to reflect what the Chinese believe, "the higher you go, the lonelier you are" (Zhang, 2007b).

More controversial than ever before in criticism of Zhang Yimou, the film has been criticized for its crazy pursuit of "a gargantuan set." It has also been ridiculed by the media as "eye-popping" for its "gold-laced imperial palace," "three million chrysanthemums," and its costumes and "special effects" (Barboza, 2007). And, together with Zhang's other so-called "homegrown blockbuster" films, it is labeled lacking in "basic concerns for humanity" (Cheng, 2010, p. 132). Nevertheless, *Curse of the Golden Flower* is seen again haunted by the incest motif. In other words, in terms of themes, as admitted by the film director himself, the film is still obsessed with the sexual transgression represented in *Thunderstorm* and, of course, *Desire under the Elms.*

In the cross-gerne transformation, Zhang Yimou drastically moved the transgression scenario from a feudal-capitalist Chinese family of the twentieth century to the court of a Chinese golden dynastic age, the Tang Dynasty (618-907). In comparison with *Thunderstorm*, Zhang Yimou charged his representation of the central theme with some sort of classic tone and an atmosphere of noble tragedy. As he says: "The story represents a time when men dominated society. Women were oppressed. It was a repression of humanity. . . . As an emperor, you'll have dual personalities. You are the greatest and strongest, but you will always be the loneliest. . . . In a male-dominated society, [the empress] is the central victim" (Zhang, 2007b). Here Zhang Yimou's filmic transgressions between son and stepmother and between half-brother and half-sister are seen beyond representing the dark and appalling past and present of the legendary Chinese royal family in imperial China. In a deeper sense, echoing the mythical, transcendental, libidinal desire in the

Nietzschean sense in *Desire under the Elms* via Cao Yu's *Thunderstorm*, Zhang Yimou foregrounds in the film a situation which, by compounding adultery with incest, breaks all kinds of boundaries and "brings into play the fundamental psychological motivations of love and honor, sex and vengeance" (Gerard, 1993, p. 2).

Conclusion

The forgoing examination and analysis of Eugene O'Neill's fascination with Daoism throughout his career and the direct and indirect influences of O'Neill's drama upon Chinese modern plays and traditional theaters over the course of the twentieth century and contemporary Chinese cinema at the dawn of the twenty-first century have suggested a cross-cultural, cross-genre two-way relationship between the American playwright and Chinese culture. Tracing the genealogy of such reciprocal relationship provides us with a larger comparative cultural context where we understand better the non-ethnocentric features of a great dramatic or cinematic work, American or Chinese, as well as why writers and artists use and reuse certain motifs, plots and characters for specific purposes in a particular place and time.

Moreover, it is in this large context that the realistic meanings of the cross-cultural, cross-genre art exchange in the foregoing discussions signify. For these talented artists, no matter whether they are Chinese or American, theatrical or cinematic art is not an end itself. Rather, it functions as a mediator between (hi)storytelling and the audience whereby the artist transmits their point of view. Blending Daoist elements into his dramatic vision, Eugene O'Neill is believed to try to find a remedy for his fundamental despair in religion or the primacy of emotion to resolve his conflict with the modern pragmatism of Western world. Whereas by appropriating and transforming O'Neill's histrionic techniques and dramatic vision and theme for their modern *huaju* and traditional *xiqu* theaters, Cao Yu, as claimed in his preface to *Thunderstorm*, sought to release his "overwhelming passion" in "vilifying the Chinese family system and society" (qtd in Lau, 1970, p. 6); and Xu Fen, by embodying dialectic notions of "desire" in the *chuanju* opera, criticized "the ultra-leftist line that the Communist leadership adopted before 1976, which denied human desire and imposed a lifestyle of 'asceticism' on the entire population" (qtd in Zhu and Liu, 2009, p. 5). Indebted to both his American and Chinese predecessors, while entertaining audiences with the spectacular filmic opulence of the legendary imperial palace in *Curse of the Golden Flower*, Zhang Yimou attempted an allegorical depiction of the "courtly" corruptions and power struggles beneath the seemingly splendid and prosperous state, as the film director himself remarks: "Beneath a beautiful exterior…. within the palace, the regime was corrupt" (Zhang, 2007b).

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