Brechtian Alienation in Chinese Drama: A Study of

White Deer Plain

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Abstract

This study explores the integration of Brechtian drama techniques with Chinese theatrical traditions through an analysis of *White Deer Plain*. By incorporating Brecht's principles, particularly the alienation effect (Verfremdungseffekt), within Confucian moral frameworks, the production develops a distinctly localized theatrical language. Regional elements such as Huayin Laoqiang and Shaanxi dialect are not merely decorative but are integral tools for critiquing social structures, gender dynamics, and historical legacies. The interplay between Confucian ideals and Brechtian critique challenges audiences to critically assess the relevance of traditional values in the context of contemporary societal transformations. This analysis sheds light on the evolving identity of modern Chinese drama and its potential to contribute to global theatrical discourse.

1. Introduction

The adaptation of Brechtian drama in China has transitioned from early imitative practices to culturally nuanced reinterpretations that engage with local traditions and philosophies (He, 2019). A notable example is the Shaanxi People's Art Theater's adaptation of *White Deer Plain*, based on Chen Zhongshi's novel. Set in rural Shaanxi, the narrative examines themes of familial duty, societal transformation, and moral conflict against the backdrop of historical upheaval, offering a fertile ground for the integration of Brechtian techniques.

Brecht's concept of the alienation effect (Verfremdungseffekt), which seeks to disrupt audience immersion and encourage critical reflection on societal structures, is central to this adaptation

(Brecht & Willett, 1978). This technique aligns with the principles of epic theatre, emphasizing rational engagement over emotional absorption and fostering a critical dialogue on historical and cultural dynamics. Within the context of *White Deer Plain*, the alienation effect functions as a lens through which audiences are encouraged to scrutinize the intersection of individual agency and collective responsibility. The purpose of this study is to re-examine the impact of Confucian ethics on female roles from a global perspective, and to explore the innovative expression of traditional culture in combination with modern drama theory.

In recent years, there has been extensive academic discussion on the shaping of gender power relations by Confucian ethics. Although existing studies have explored the interaction between traditional culture and modern drama, there is still a lack of systematic analysis on how Tian Xiao'e's rebellious image deeply reveals this cultural tension. By introducing Brecht's alienation effect and magical realism, this study aims to deepen the understanding of gender power structure from a philosophical and artistic level.

This study underscores the transformative potential of Brechtian methodologies in non-Western theatrical traditions. By localizing Verfremdungseffekt through regional aesthetics like Huayin Laoqiang and Shaanxi dialect, the adaptation enriches global discussions on modern drama. It bridges the gap between Brechtian critique and Confucian moral philosophy, offering a framework for reinterpreting traditional values within contemporary socio-political contexts. This critical approach resonates with aspects of Confucian philosophy, particularly its emphasis on moral introspection and communal harmony. Confucian virtues such as ren (benevolence) and li (ritual propriety) provide the ethical foundation for characters like Bai Jiaxuan, whose struggles reflect the tension between adherence to tradition and the pressures of personal autonomy. However, as Shen(2014) notes, these virtues, when rigidly enforced, can act as mechanisms of control, constraining individual freedoms and perpetuating societal hierarchies. By juxtaposing Brechtian estrangement with Confucian ethical frameworks, the adaptation offers a unique opportunity to examine how theatrical practices can interrogate and reinterpret enduring cultural values.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Localization of Brechtian Drama

Before 1980, Brechtian theory in Chinese theater largely concentrated on formal elements, particularly the alienation effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*), with limited integration of cultural context(He,2019). This approach initially proved challenging for Chinese audiences, whose expectations aligned more closely with Stanislavsky's realism and the emotional immersion characteristic of traditional Chinese opera. In the 1980s and beyond, directors began fusing traditional performance styles with Brecht's dramaturgy, marking a shift toward a deeply localized adaptation that resonated with audiences(Zhang,2021).

Huang Zuolin's adaptation of *The Life of Galileo* gained widespread acclaim in post-Cultural Revolution China due to its alignment with the sociopolitical and intellectual climate of the time. After the Cultural Revolution(1966-1976), which severely suppressed intellectual freedom and scientific inquiry, China sought to rebuild trust in science and technology as tools for national rejuvenation(Li & Tam,2018). Brecht's portrayal of Galileo, a conflicted yet courageous figure who prioritizes empirical knowledge over dogma, resonated with the country's growing emphasis on scientific rationality (Brecht, 2007). Huang's adaptation of the play emphasized themes of scientific inquiry and the questioning of authority, which aligned with the intellectual climate of the time. Additionally, Huang incorporated Brechtian techniques, to encourage audiences to

critically engage with the narrative rather than simply identifying with the characters. This approach reflected the societal context of post-Cultural Revolution China, where there was an increasing focus on reevaluating relationships with authority and ideology.

At the same time, the revival of Confucian thought in the 1980s and 1990s, often referred to as the "New Confucian Movement," sought to reclaim China's cultural identity amid rapid modernization (Tu, 1993;Shen, 2014). This movement reinterpreted Confucian values such as ethical responsibility, the importance of education, and harmonious societal order to align with national development goals. While Brecht's philosophy often critiques hierarchical traditions, both Brechtian theater and Confucianism share a focus on moral accountability. In Huang's adaptation, Galileo's moral struggle and eventual capitulation can be analyzed as reflecting the Confucian ideal of introspection and ethical responsibility, interpreted through a critical and modern lens.

This synthesis of Confucian philosophy and Brechtian theater has contributed to a distinctive theatrical style in China. This hybrid form integrates Brecht's didactic approach with reflection, as outlined in Brecht's theory of epic theatre, which seeks to provoke critical engagement rather than passive empathy (Brecht, 2007). It also incorporates traditional Chinese aesthetics, such as the xieyi (expressive abstraction) style often seen in classical opera, which emphasizes philosophical evocation over detailed realism (Chan, 2013). This blending of traditions creates a medium where philosophical concepts are conveyed with an analytical distance, aligning with Brecht's alienation effect (Verfremdungseffekt).

Moreover, both Confucianism and Brechtian theater emphasize collective responsibility, framing the role of individuals in societal ethics and progress (Brecht & Tatlow,2016). Confucian thought places significant weight on the moral duties of leaders and citizens alike (Tu, 1993), while Brecht's works critique systemic structures and encourage audiences to question their roles within these frameworks (Barker, 1994). This thematic overlap facilitates a dialogue between Confucian ethics and Brechtian critique in Huang's work.

Huang Zuolin's *The Life of Galileo* exemplifies how Brechtian drama can be adapted to reflect China's evolving cultural and philosophical landscape. By blending Confucian ethics with Brechtian methodologies, Huang's adaptation contributes to a uniquely Chinese theatrical style that merges traditional values with critical modern frameworks. This adaptation enriches Chinese theater while illustrating how global ideas can be localized to address specific cultural and historical contexts.

Directors like Huang Zuolin integrated Brechtian principles with traditional aesthetics, such as the xieyi style of Chinese opera, which prioritizes expressive abstraction. This fusion aligns with Brecht's emphasis on creating theater that encourages intellectual engagement rather than emotional immersion (Brecht, 2007). Such an approach resonated with audiences in post-Cultural Revolution China, as it bridged the gap between traditional theatrical forms and contemporary critical perspectives. By offering a medium that was both familiar and intellectually stimulating, Huang's adaptation addressed the socio-political complexities of the era, creating a theatrical language that engages audiences both culturally and critically. This process of localizing Brecht's techniques in Chinese theater reflects the following characteristics: A recontextualization of traditional aesthetics to convey modern critical ideas.

●A didactic yet reflective tone that fosters intellectual engagement.

●A shared focus on collective responsibility and ethical introspection, grounded in both Brechtian and Confucian principles.

In *White Deer Plain*, classical Greek elements of tragic grandeur and mystique intertwine with Brechtian ideals of rationality and critical engagement, creating a unique dramatic tension. The

stage embodies a complex interplay of social oppression, religious mysticism, and the rebellious spirit of personal desire. Brecht's theatrical principles find powerful expression here, reimagined through a contemporary Chinese aesthetic that brings forth a distinctively modern Chinese theatrical form (Xu & Morina, 2024). This fusion allows Brechtian tension to be dynamically explored, producing a stage language that resonates with Chinese cultural sensibilities while retaining the critical edge of Brechtian drama.

2.2 Historical Context and Social Commentary in *White Deer Plain*

While Brecht admired the symbolic abstraction in Chinese opera, traditional practices prioritize immersive character embodiment, often contradicting his call for critical detachment. *White Deer Plain* negotiates this tension by combining stylized operatic gestures with materialist critique, as seen in the possession scene of Tian Xiaoe.

In *White Deer Plain*, Chen Zhongshi begins with Balzac's quote: "Fiction is considered the secret history of a nation," setting the stage for a narrative deeply embedded in Chinese history (Chen, 2012). Spanning the fall of the Qing Dynasty to the founding of the People's Republic, the novel captures nearly half a century of social upheaval, with major events like land reform and civil conflicts shaping the narrative. The multi-dimensional depiction of political, cultural, and social spaces highlights the evolving dynamics during these transformative periods (Gao, 2020). This context enables nuanced explorations of tradition versus modernity, as characters navigate ideological struggles that mirror the broader societal transitions.

The novel is heavily influenced by three significant Chinese literary movements: introspection literature, wounded literature, and root-seeking literature (Dew, 1990). These trends reflect the profound psychological scars of campaigns such as the Yan'an Rectification Movement (1942), the Anti-Rightist Campaign (1957), and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). *White Deer Plain* articulates these historical traumas through characters like Bai Ling, whose tragic fate encapsulates the disillusionment and suffering of those caught in ideological purges. This narrative critique aligns with the thematic concerns of wounded literature, offering poignant reflections on the social and emotional toll of political upheaval (Yang, 2012)

The post-Cultural Revolution era marked a significant shift in Chinese literature, embracing both Western ideas and a revival of Confucian thought. Root-seeking literature emphasizes reconnecting with Chinese cultural identity, often through Confucian lenses (Li & Tom, 2017). *White Deer Plain* epitomizes this revival, presenting a nuanced portrayal of Confucian ideals alongside their limitations. The character of Mr. Zhu embodies Confucian principles of moral discipline and social harmony while grappling with societal chaos, reflecting Chen's skepticism about the sufficiency of traditional values to address modern disruptions (Shu, 2013). This tension between Confucianism and modernity underscores the philosophical depth of the novel, situating it as a critique of both historical and metaphysical uncertainties (Tantawy, 2023).

The white deer, a recurring symbol in the novel, intertwines mythology and reality, serving as a metaphor for purity, resilience, and the cyclical nature of fortune. Its appearances and transformations mirror the community's struggles with fate and morality, offering a surreal yet grounded critique of societal values (Wang, 2023). Similarly, the character Tian Xiaoe's spectral return exemplifies the use of magical realism to challenge patriarchal authority and feudal traditions. Her defiance, articulated through Lu San's voice, confronts societal oppression while exposing the contradictions of moral and social hierarchies.

The novel's adaptation into stage and film further emphasizes its historical and social commentary. Early-stage versions faced challenges in authentically portraying the rural Northwest community(Fan,2024). The Shaanxi People's Art Theatre's adaptation, directed by Hu

Zongqi, incorporated Brechtian techniques to balance authenticity with critical distance. Casting ordinary individuals as characters reinforced the narrative's grounded realism, while Brecht's encouraged audiences to reflect critically on the socio-political structures depicted (Meng, 2016). This adaptation exemplified how historical narratives could be reinterpreted through innovative theatrical methods to engage contemporary audiences.

3. Methodology

The following table illustrates the intersections between Brechtian principles and Confucian ideals as applied in the adaptation of *White Deer Plain*. By juxtaposing key aspects of Brechtian drama, such as the alienation effect and epic theater, with Confucian ethical frameworks, including ren (benevolence), li (ritual propriety), and xiao (filial piety), the table highlights how these two seemingly distinct traditions are synthesized in the adaptation process(Confucius,2003; Rosemont & Ames, 2009). This synthesis not only deepens the moral and cultural resonance of the performance but also offers a critical lens for evaluating the compatibility of traditional values with Brecht's revolutionary theatrical techniques. The table serves as a conceptual foundation for understanding the philosophical and cultural dimensions underpinning the adaptation.

Table 1: Intersections Between Brechtian Principles and Confucian Ideals in *White Deer Plain*

Brechtian Principle	Confucian Ideal	Manifestation in *White Deer Plain*	Socio-Political Implications
Alienation Effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*)	Moral Introspection (*xiu shen*)	Symbolic staging (ancestral plaque, reconfigurable walls) disrupts narrative immersion.	Encourages audiences to critically examine the balance between moral discipline and societal expectations.
Critique of Hierarchies	Ritual Propriety (*li*)	Bai Jiaxuan's adherence to familial duty versus personal autonomy.	Highlights the tension between rigid hierarchies and individual agency in a rapidly modernizing society.
Exposure of Social Contradictions	Collective Responsibility (*he*)	Huayin Laoqiang and Shaanxi dialect symbolize communal struggles and cultural identity.	Illustrates the inclusivity of folk traditions in addressing collective socio-political challenges.
Historicization (Epic Theatre)	Reverence for Tradition (*xiao*, Filial Piety)	The white deer as a motif links ancestral values to generational transformation.	Frames tradition as both a stabilizing force and a potential obstacle to societal progress.

| Emphasis on Rational Engagement | Harmony (*zhong he*) | Ghostly possession of Tian Xiaoe critiques gender and societal inequalities. | Reflects on systemic injustices and challenges the legitimacy of societal norms enforcing conformity and oppression. |

3.1 Brechtian Alienation in Chinese Context

Brecht's influence gained momentum in China post-1949, supported by the government's socialist agenda, disrupting narrative immersion and encouraing audiences to critically engage with societal contradictions. Productions like Mother Courage and Her Children and *The Life of Galileo* exemplified this approach, blending Brechtian methods with traditional Chinese aesthetics (Zhang, 2021). Wong (1982) highlights the influence of East Asian theater on Brecht's conceptualization of Verfremdungseffekt, particularly in the stylization and abstraction inherent in Chinese opera. Huang Zuolin's adaptation integration of Brechtian principles with traditional Chinese aesthetics, particularly the xieyi (expressive abstraction) style, is prominent in Chinese opera. However, Huang's reliance on abstraction sometimes challenged audience comprehension, illustrating the tension between symbolic depth and narrative clarity. This tension highlights a key gap: the difficulty in balancing traditional aesthetics with Brechtian methodologies to ensure accessibility without diminishing intellectual engagement.

The 1990s and 2000s saw a continuation of this experimental trajectory through China's avant-garde small theater movement. Small theater productions frequently engaged in cultural hybridization as a platform for innovation, blending indigenous theatrical forms with global techniques, including Brechtian estrangement. Productions like Xi'an Drama Theatre's The Good Person of Sichuan illustrate the potential and limitations of this approach. The play's innovative use of stagecraft—rotating platforms, steel structures, and minimalist settings—effectively amplified Brechtian estrangement while exploring societal contradictions. Moreover, the character Shen Dai's moral struggles encapsulated Brecht's critique of ethical dilemmas in modern society, as Brecht (1978) argued, theatrical elements should serve to expose societal contradictions rather than reinforce emotional engagement. Ma (2021) notes that Brechtian alienation is particularly effective in socialist narratives, where it exposes the contradictions within systemic hierarchies. However, the production's heavy reliance on abstraction and fragmented narratives often created a cultural and emotional distance for audiences, particularly those less familiar with avant-garde methods.

This gap in cultural accessibility results from the dual demands of intellectual rigor and emotional connection and reflects the broader challenge of cultural synthesis. Brechtian theater, rooted in Western traditions of critique and abstraction, often contrasts with the communal and moral ethos central to Confucianism (Chowdhury, 2019). Reconciling these differences requires a nuanced approach that preserves the intellectual depth of Brecht's methods while ensuring resonance with Chinese cultural values and aesthetic preferences.

In this context, *White Deer Plain* emerges as a compelling resolution to these challenges, offering a methodological framework for bridging these gaps. The production integrates Confucian philosophy with Brechtian critique by identifying their shared emphasis on moral accountability and collective responsibility. Unlike earlier works, *White Deer Plain* prioritizes narrative clarity while maintaining the reflective distance central to Brechtian theater. Its

semi-realist storytelling, combined with carefully crafted estrangement techniques, allows for a balanced exploration of ethical and societal complexities. For example, the play employs Brechtian tools, such as direct audience address and episodic structure, while grounding its narrative in the Confucian ideals of community harmony and individual ethical self-discipline.

Additionally, *White Deer Plain* synthesizes the experimental ethos of small theater with Brecht's stagecraft principles. It incorporates visually compelling yet culturally familiar design elements, such as the use of spatial metaphors drawn from Chinese rural landscapes, to create a setting that is both evocative and accessible. The play's ability to engage audiences intellectually and emotionally is further enhanced by its measured use of abstraction, ensuring that symbolic elements enrich rather than obscure the narrative.

3.2 Integration of Huayin Laoqiang and the Chorus

In the Shaanxi People's Art Theatre's adaptation of *White Deer Plain*, Huayin Laoqiang music and the dynamic role of the chorus work together to deepen the production's cultural resonance while serving Brechtian aims. Huayin Laoqiang connects deeply with local folk traditions as an intangible cultural heritage, evoking a strong sense of cultural identity and belonging(Yang,2021). The bold and unrestrained vocal style of Huayin Laoqiang not only conveys emotional intensity but also embodies the collective ethos of the region, linking the narrative to the socio-cultural roots of Shaanxi.

The chorus, a pivotal production element, fulfills dual roles that align with Brechtian and traditional Chinese theatrical practices. The chorus here is a revival of the performance form often used by the early ancient Greek chorus in grand tragedies(Burden,2007). Functioning as a narrative guide, the chorus offers commentary on the unfolding events, echoing Brecht's Verfremdungseffekt by reminding the audience of the play's constructed nature and prompting critical reflection. Simultaneously, the chorus can be understood as an extension of the characters themselves, embodying the collective consciousness of the rural community depicted in the play. This dual identity—narrator and participant—enables the chorus to oscillate between objectivity and subjectivity, offering a layered perspective on the socio-political issues explored in the narrative.

The interplay between Huayin Laoqiang and the chorus amplifies the production's thematic depth. For example, in scenes of communal rituals, such as ancestral worship, the chorus sings in a style reminiscent of Huayin Laoqiang, creating a blend of commentary and participation that bridges traditional aesthetics with Brechtian critique. The use of Huayin Laoqiang here is not merely ornamental but integral to the cultural and narrative fabric of the play, reinforcing themes of moral responsibility and communal identity while challenging audiences to examine the societal structures underpinning these traditions critically. This approach exemplifies the balancing act of integrating avant-garde techniques with culturally familiar forms, bridging modernity and tradition to achieve a synthesis that is both intellectually rigorous and emotionally resonant.

Furthermore, the dual role of the chorus as narrators and characters enriches the play's exploration of moral complexity. When the chorus steps into the role of villagers, their exaggerated expressions and gestures critique societal norms, such as gossip and collective judgment. Yet, in ritual scenes, their solemnity underscores the weight of Confucian values, positioning the audience both as participants in and observers of these traditions. This layered representation invites audiences to grapple with the dualities inherent in the rural community's ethos—its capacity for both unity and oppression—thereby preserving the critical reflection central to Brechtian estrangement.

3.3 Stage Design and Visual Symbolism

The Shaanxi adaptation of *White Deer Plain* employs minimalist staging and symbolic props not only as aesthetic tools but as vehicles for a critical exploration of Confucian philosophy and its socio-cultural implications. Through dynamic lighting, reconfigurable props, and ritualistic elements, the production creates a platform for examining the tension between moral ideals and human nature while maintaining Brechtian principles of critical engagement (Baugh,2012).

The conceptual framework below illustrates the adaptation process in *White Deer Plain*, synthesizing Brechtian theatrical techniques and Confucian ideals. The inputs represent the foundational philosophies, while the processes highlight practical methodologies such as cultural adaptation and symbolic experimentation. The outputs showcase the dual impact: an innovative theatrical language and an audience experience characterized by rational engagement and cultural immersion.
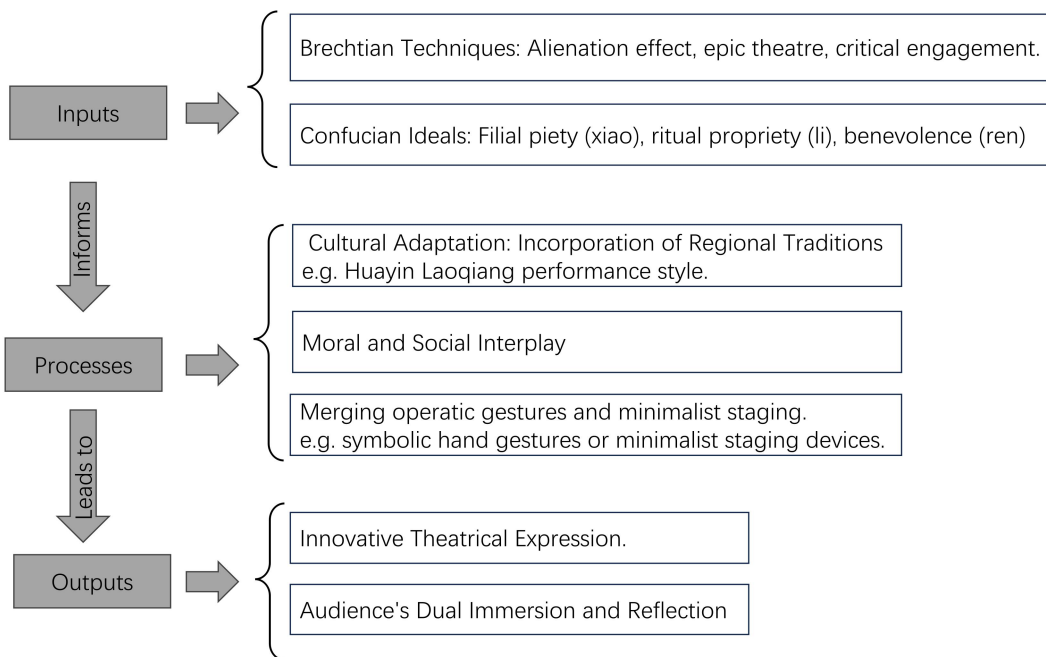
Inputs
→
- Brechtian Techniques: Alienation effect, epic theatre, critical engagement.
- Confucian Ideals: Filial piety (xiao), ritual propriety (li), benevolence (ren)

Informs ↓

Processes
→
- Cultural Adaptation: Incorporation of Regional Traditions e.g. Huayin Laoqiang performance style.
- Moral and Social Interplay
- Merging operatic gestures and minimalist staging. e.g. symbolic hand gestures or minimalist staging devices.

Leads to ↓

Outputs
→
- Innovative Theatrical Expression.
- Audience's Dual Immersion and Reflection

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Synthesizing Brechtian and Confucian Elements in White Deer Plain.

3.3.1 The Ancestral Plaque and Confucian Tensions

Central to the stage design is the ancestral plaque, a symbol of Confucian reverence for lineage and moral duty. Throughout the play, its omnipresence underscores the Bai family's adherence to li (ritual propriety) and xiao (filial piety). Yet the plaque also exposes the paradoxical nature of Confucian ideals: while fostering societal stability, it imposes constraints on individual agency. For instance, Bai Jiaxuan's frequent kneeling before the plaque signifies his internalized commitment to Confucian ethics, The principle of xiao (filial piety), central to Confucian philosophy, is vividly reflected in Bai Jiaxuan's reverence for the ancestral plaque. According to The Analects (Huang, 1997), such filial devotion ensures societal harmony but can also perpetuate hierarchical constraints,　yet the stark lighting isolates him in these moments, symbolizing the alienation caused by the weight of tradition.

The philosophical debates between Bai Jiaxuan and Mr. Zhu further illuminate the interplay of Confucian ideals with the complexities of human nature. Bai Jiaxuan's pragmatic decision-making reflects Mencius'belief in the innate goodness of human nature (*ren xing ben*

shan), as he strives to uphold benevolence and righteousness even in morally ambiguous situations. Conversely, Mr. Zhu's rigid adherence to rules echoes Xunzi's view that human nature is inherently flawed (*ren xing ben e*), requiring strict discipline to maintain order. This ideological dichotomy manifests on stage through contrasting uses of space: Bai Jiaxuan is often shown in transitional, fluid settings, such as the reconfigurable courtyards, emphasizing adaptability, while Mr. Zhu is framed within static and confined spaces, symbolizing the rigidity of his worldview.

3.3.2 Ritual and Rebellion: A Dual Exploration

Ritualistic elements in the play, such as prayers for rain and ancestral worship(Brown,2019), serve as focal points for examining the duality of the Confucian tradition. The actors' deliberate positioning—turning their backs to the audience—immerses viewers in the solemnity of the rituals while simultaneously creating a Brechtian distancing effect. This dual approach invites audiences to experience both the emotional resonance of communal traditions and their potential for reinforcing conformity and hierarchy.

A pivotal moment of rebellion occurs when Heiwa smashes the ancestral stone tablet, symbolizing a rejection of feudal oppression. This act disrupts the ritualized order, with the shattered plaque giving way to a bold red backdrop emblazoned with "Public Trial Assembly." This visual shift invokes associations with Cultural Revolution-era public denunciations, critiquing the cyclical nature of societal scapegoating and collective enforcement of ideological norms. The exaggerated display of bound "criminals" and dunce caps recalls Xunzi's argument for stringent corrective measures, yet the absurdity of the scene encourages viewers to question the efficacy and ethical implications of such rigid structures (Li, 2022).

Lighting and spatial design further amplify these critiques. For example, during Bai Jiaxuan's moral dilemmas, stark, overhead lighting isolates him while shadows of the chorus loom around him, embodying societal pressures. The interplay of light and shadow echoes Confucian debates on the balance between individual desires and collective responsibilities, urging audiences to consider the costs of maintaining social harmony at the expense of personal freedom.

3.3.3 Philosophical Synthesis and Cultural Reflection

The Shaanxi production integrates Brechtian theatrical techniques with Confucian philosophical inquiry, creating a rich platform for cultural and intellectual reflection. By juxtaposing Mencius' optimism with Xunzi's skepticism, the play highlights the unresolved tension within Confucian thought regarding human nature(Guo,2024). Bai Jiaxuan's character arc reflects this synthesis: his efforts to maintain moral rectitude amidst shifting social and economic landscapes embody both the aspirational and oppressive dimensions of Confucian ideals.

Moreover, the minimalist stage design bridges traditional Chinese aesthetics with Brecht's modernist ethos (Brecht & Kuhn,2014). The ancestral plaque, reconfigurable walls, and ritualistic elements evoke a distinctly Chinese cultural identity, while their dynamic presentation aligns with Brechtian principles of estrangement. This interplay ensures that the production remains accessible to contemporary audiences while challenging them to critically engage with enduring cultural values in creating a Brechtian aesthetic. (Willett, 1964).

By transforming the stage into a site of cultural critique, the Shaanxi adaptation addresses the enduring relevance of Confucian philosophy in modern society. It recontextualizes traditional symbols to prompt reflection on the interplay of individual agency, societal expectations, and the mechanisms of moral governance. This layered approach enriches the audience's experience, allowing them to explore both the historical roots and contemporary implications of the values depicted in *White Deer Plain*.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Tensions Between Tradition and Modernity

White Deer Plain demonstrates a significant advancement in its integration of Confucian values and Brechtian critique, presenting a nuanced approach distinct from the thematic clarity of Brecht's canonical works, such as The Good Person of Szechwan and Life of Galileo. In contrast to Brecht's focus on linear narratives and explicit ideological oppositions, *White Deer Plain* delves into the complexities of reconciling Chinese cultural traditions with modern theatrical methodologies, offering a balanced yet critical exploration of these intersecting frameworks.

Characters like Bai Jiaxuan symbolize Confucian ideals of moral discipline and filial piety, serving as representations of stability and tradition within a shifting societal landscape. However, these values are consistently interrogated by characters such as Tian Xiaoe, whose defiance and tragic end reveal the inherent contradictions and oppressive aspects of traditional moral codes. Yuan (2016) identifies the elements that disrupt narrative immersion, amplifying Brecht's alienation effect by reframing familial. Unlike The Good Person of Szechwan, which critiques moral goodness in a universal context, *White Deer Plain* situates its exploration within the specific cultural milieu of Confucian philosophy, revealing how the pursuit of societal harmony can suppress personal autonomy and reinforce systemic hierarchies.

The adaptation employs Brechtian techniques, notably the alienation effect (Brecht & Manheim, 2016). This method presents different materialization styles in modernization to encourage critical engagement rather than emotional immersion Through calculated contrasts in lighting, spatial arrangements, and character dynamics, the production critiques traditional ethical frameworks while fostering audience reflection on their contemporary relevance. Bai Jiaxuan's outward embodiment of Confucian virtues, juxtaposed with his internal struggles, illustrates the philosophical tension between Mencius' belief in innate human goodness (renxing ben shan) and Xunzi's perspective on humanity's inherent selfishness (renxing ben e).

This philosophical conflict is rendered through nuanced staging, presenting characters not as static archetypes but as individuals grappling with societal change. While Brecht's works often delineate clear ideological divides, *White Deer Plain* offers a more intricate portrayal of cultural identity and moral ambiguity. By contextualizing its critique within the frameworks of Confucian thought, the play achieves a depth that extends beyond conventional theatrical critique, creating a dialogue between Eastern and Western traditions.

The adaptation's innovative fusion of these traditions also highlights the complexities of such integration. The interplay between Confucian ideals and Brechtian methodologies transforms *White Deer Plain* into a hybrid theatrical experience, reflecting on the challenges and possibilities of bridging diverse philosophical and theatrical paradigms. By doing so, it not only critiques entrenched social norms but also illustrates the enduring relevance of cultural reflection in addressing contemporary issues.
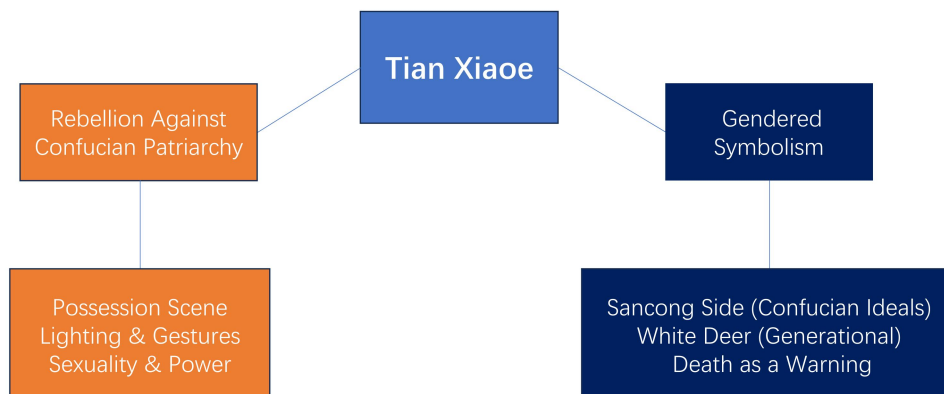
4.2 Gender Dynamics and Social Commentary

Figure 2: Tian Xiaoe's Rebellion and Symbolism: A Gendered Perspective in White Deer Plain

The proposed concept map visually outlines key gender dynamics and symbolic representations in *White Deer Plain*, with a particular focus on the character Tian Xiaoe and her thematic significance. This visualization highlights her rebellion against Confucian patriarchy and the symbolic inversion of gendered power, particularly through the possession scene. Furthermore, it delves into broader gendered symbolism, such as the "Sancong Side" (Three Obediences and Four Virtues), the metaphor of Xiaoe as societal vengeance, and the generational implications tied to the white deer(Louie & Edwards,1994). By connecting these elements, the concept map underscores the interplay between gender critiques and symbolic storytelling, offering a structured perspective on how these themes are interwoven into the narrative.

Tian Xiaoe's narrative arc engages with the philosophical debate between Mencius' view of human nature as inherently good (*renxing ben shan*) and Xunzi's argument for its inherent selfishness (*renxing ben e*) (Xunzi, 2015). Tian Xiaoe's character critiques patriarchal structures rooted in Confucian philosophy, which emphasizes moral codes such as *li* (ritual propriety), *xiao* (filial piety), and *sancong side* (Three Obediences and Four Virtues). Scholars like Lu (2021) argue that Confucian doctrines such as *sancong side* reduce women to instruments of male authority, perpetuating gender hierarchies that require women to submit to fathers, husbands, and sons.

In *White Deer Plain*, these principles manifest in Tian Xiaoe's treatment by the men around her, who view her as both an object of desire and a moral scapegoat. Her rebellion against these constraints symbolizes a broader critique of Confucian ideals, particularly their prioritization of societal harmony at the expense of personal freedom. As An and Cui (2023) note, Tian Xiaoe's resistance transcends individual defiance, exposing the systemic hypocrisy within Confucian doctrines that often mask patriarchal oppression under the guise of moral virtue.

The theatrical adaptation brings these philosophical tensions to life through narrative and staging. For instance, Tian Xiaoe's possession scene serves as both a symbolic and performative critique of Confucian ethics. The Shaanxi adaptation employs Brechtian theatrical techniques, such as *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect), to prompt critical reflection. During the possession

scene, the contrast between the spectral Tian Xiaoe and the puppet-like movements of Lu San creates a physical representation of the conflict between duty and autonomy, societal expectation and individual justice. The audience is thus encouraged to analyze Tian Xiaoe's plight critically rather than empathizing with her suffering—a hallmark of Brecht's materialist approach to theatre (Barnett, 2015).

Beyond Brechtian techniques, the adaptation incorporates elements of magical realism to interrogate the moral doctrines central to Confucianism. Tian Xiaoe's spectral transformation into moths and her possession of Lu San symbolize the cyclical nature of oppression and resistance. This metaphor parallels Confucian concerns about the balance between heavenly principles (*tian li*) and human desires (*ren yu*). Unlike straightforward critiques of societal structures in Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechwan*, the adaptation blends symbolic and spiritual elements to explore deeper moral and metaphysical dilemmas.

The narrative also sustains a focus on the Confucian philosophical debate regarding human nature. Tian Xiaoe's initial trust in personal desires aligns with Mencius' ideal that goodness flourishes in a supportive environment. However, her eventual betrayal and ostracism reflect Xunzi's view that societal structures, while necessary to restrain human selfishness, often exacerbate suffering when misapplied. This dynamic critiques the misuse of Confucian ethics to justify patriarchal dominance, as Jun (2020) highlights, exposing how moral doctrines can serve as tools of control rather than genuine harmony.

Through Tian Xiaoe's narrative, the adaptation invites the audience to interrogate the compatibility of Confucian ideals with contemporary values of equality and individual rights. Her rebellion and tragic fate mirror the resilience of the human spirit, emphasizing the urgency of cultural transformation to transcend the limitations of traditional moral frameworks.

4.3 Tensions in Performative Aesthetics

The adaptation of *White Deer Plain* employs visual and performative elements to delve into deeper philosophical and socio-political critiques. By blending traditional Chinese aesthetics with Brechtian dramaturgy, the performance explores the intersections of gender, power, morality, and ritual, situating itself within the cultural and historical framework of Shaanxi.

The following table provides a comparative analysis of the adaptation techniques employed in *White Deer Plain*, highlighting the integration of Brechtian theatrical principles with traditional Chinese aesthetics. It examines how specific Brechtian techniques, such as the alienation effect and epic narrative structure, have been reinterpreted through the lens of Chinese cultural elements, such as operatic gestures and symbolic staging.

Table 2: Comparison of Brechtian Techniques and Traditional Chinese Aesthetics in *White Deer Plain*

Aspect	Brechtian Technique	Traditional Chinese Aesthetic	Integration in *White Deer Plain*
Music and Sound	Commentary through musical interludes	Huayin Laoqiang as a cultural expression	Huayin Laoqiang reflects both regional identity and social critique.
Character Performance	Alienation through gestural acting	Symbolic, ritualized body movements	Tian Xiaoe's possession scene

		(xieyi)	blends Brechtian detachment with operatic gestures.
Set Design	Minimalist and functional staging	Abstract, suggestive backdrops	Reconfigurable walls and the ancestral plaque disrupt narrative immersion.
Symbolism	Historical materialism	Mythical motifs (e.g., the white deer)	The white deer symbolizes generational and moral conflicts.

4.3.1 Regional and Ritual Symbolism

Huayin Laoqiang, originally associated with shadow puppetry, holds a unique position in Shaanxi's cultural identity. Known for its bold vocal style rooted in boatmen's shouts, Laoqiang distinguishes itself from other shadow puppetry traditions by emphasizing themes of struggle rather than romance(Shi,2014). In the context of *White Deer Plain*, this raw, unrestrained musical form aligns with Brechtian principles by interrupting emotional immersion and inviting critical reflection on the communal struggles of the characters.

The historical association of Huayin Laoqiang with ritualistic performances, such as Zhang Xi Min's troupe's now-defunct rain-praying plays, further underscores its connection to Catherine Bell's ritual theory. According to Bell(1992), rituals both reflect and construct community identity, reinforcing shared values while negotiating power dynamics. In *White Deer Plain*, the inclusion of Laoqiang serves as an auditory representation of the village's collective voice, tying the narrative to the community's ritualistic and cultural practices while challenging hierarchical Confucian ideals of propriety.

The use of the Shaanxi dialect complements this ritualistic dimension. Its tonal humor and earthy rhythm encourage audiences to engage critically with Confucian values, disrupting the seriousness typically associated with such ideals. As Victor Turner's (1969)concept of "communitas" suggests, communal expression through shared cultural forms, such as dialect and music, temporarily dissolves rigid hierarchies, offering moments of egalitarian critique within the structured world of Confucian ethics.

4.3.2. Reinterpreting Traditional Chinese Opera Through Brechtian Critique

Brecht's fascination with Chinese opera, though influential, has often been criticized for misunderstanding its essence(He,2019). While Brecht admired Chinese opera's ability to create distance through stylized performance, traditional Chinese opera training—such as Mei Lanfang's meticulous approach in the Mei School—emphasizes immersion and repetitive practice to achieve an almost self-effacing embodiment of the role. Stories like Cheng Yanqiu's dedication to the *qingyi* role and the fictionalized narrative in *Farewell My Concubine* exemplify the intense character immersion often required in traditional opera(Zhu,2024).

In *White Deer Plain*, this tension is addressed and reimagined. The ghostly possession scene of Tian Xiaoe demonstrates a hybridization of Brechtian alienation and Chinese operatic embodiment. The male actor, representing Tian Xiaoe's "puppet," performs through highly stylized operatic gestures, reflecting the control and manipulation inherent in Tian Xiaoe's

posthumous revenge. Meanwhile, the physical staging—the male actor on the ground level and Tian Xiaoe elevated in the background—embodies Brecht's concept of materializing abstract forces on stage while retaining the precision and discipline central to traditional Chinese opera.

4.3.3 The White Deer as a Theatrical Device

The white deer, a recurring symbol in the original novel, presents unique challenges in theatrical adaptation. A literal representation could risk undermining its allegorical depth. Instead, the Shaanxi adaptation opts for a minimalist approach, using dialogue and character interactions to sustain its symbolic resonance. The symbolic presence of the white deer in *White Deer Plain* aligns with the principles of magical realism, blending the supernatural with the mundane to critique societal structures (Zamora & Faris, 1995).

In Confucian philosophy, animals often serve as moral exemplars or metaphors for human virtues. The white deer, as Bai Jiaxuan's dreamt-of protector, embodies the Confucian ideal of harmony between humanity and nature. Yet, its death following Bai Ling's unjust fate complicates this idea, suggesting a breakdown of traditional values under the pressures of modernity. Jiang (2024) highlights how the white deer evolves as a symbol of generational conflict and societal transformation, a motif that underscores the tension between Confucian ideals and modernity in the adaptation.

This symbolic complexity allows for a comparison with Beckett's Waiting for Godo (Rentz,2023). In *Waiting for Godot*, the absence of Godot highlights existential uncertainty, while in *White Deer Plain*, the elusive presence of the white deer reflects the tension between hope and disillusionment (Vasadze, 2020). Both works engage with the concept of abstract ideals, prompting the audience to examine their meaning and reliability within their respective contexts.

5. Conclusion and Future Research

The adaptation of White Deer Plain exemplifies a sophisticated integration of Brechtian theatrical principles with Chinese cultural and philosophical traditions. Through its hybrid theatrical language, the production bridges Brechtian Verfremdungseffekt with regional elements such as Huayin Laoqiang, Shaanxi dialect, and symbolic staging. This integration challenges audiences to critically engage with entrenched socio-political values while appreciating the cultural authenticity of Shaanxi's traditions.

One of the production's most significant achievements lies in its ability to reinterpret Brecht's alienation techniques within a localized framework. For example, the possession scene of Tian Xiaoe reimagines traditional Chinese opera gestures to critique gendered power dynamics, blending operatic immersion with Brechtian materialism to foreground systemic inequalities. Similarly, the recurring motif of the white deer encapsulates the philosophical tension between Confucian ideals of harmony (he) and the transformative pressures of modernity, offering a nuanced commentary on generational conflict and the fragility of moral traditions(Rosemont & Ames, 2009).

This study highlights the adaptability of Brechtian methodologies within non-Western contexts, demonstrating how White Deer Plain transcends the dichotomy between cultural preservation and theatrical innovation. By embedding Brechtian critique within the symbolic and ritualistic framework of Chinese theater, the production not only maintains narrative clarity but also expands the boundaries of modern drama as a vehicle for cultural reflection and critique.

5.1 Future Research Directions

This research underscores the transformative potential of hybrid theatrical methodologies and opens pathways for further exploration. Two key directions for future study are:

- **Comparative Frameworks**

Expanding the analysis to other Chinese adaptations of Brechtian works, such as The Good Person of Szechwan, could illuminate how different productions navigate the balance between Brechtian abstraction and the preservation of regional aesthetics. Comparative studies could also address how regional variations impact audience reception and socio-political critique, providing a broader understanding of Brecht's influence on Chinese modern drama.

- **Philosophical and Cross-Cultural Integration**

Further investigation into the philosophical intersections between Brechtian critique and Confucian ethics would enrich the discourse on moral accountability and collective responsibility in non-Western contexts. Additionally, exploring the adaptation of Brechtian methodologies within other cultural traditions, such as Indian Rasa theory or African oral storytelling, could reveal new dimensions of theatrical innovation and global relevance.

5.2 Conclusion

By integrating Brechtian critique with Confucian moral introspection, This approach expands Brechtian discourse by illustrating its relevance beyond Western traditions, offering a model for theatrical innovation in cross-cultural contexts. *White Deer Plain* expands the applicability of the alienation effect in non-Western contexts and its broader implications for modern Chinese drama and offers a framework for critically engaging with cultural and ideological traditions. This study contributes to the ongoing dialogue about the fusion of Brechtian principles with regional and philosophical traditions, using *White Deer Plain* as a case study to highlight the possibilities of such integration. By blending local aesthetics with Brechtian dramaturgy, the adaptation demonstrates the potential of modern drama to engage with complex cultural and ethical dilemmas.

The findings of this research not only advance the understanding of Brecht's influence on Chinese theater but also highlight the broader capacity of hybrid methodologies to transcend cultural and disciplinary boundaries. As theater continues to evolve as a medium for cultural dialogue, the innovative approaches examined in this study offer a compelling blueprint for exploring tradition, modernity, and global theatrical discourse.

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