



"Poetic Imagery" and "Silence"— A Brief Analysis of the Structural Composition of *Beijingren*

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Abstract. *Beijingren* is regarded as a pinnacle of 20th-century Chinese drama. In this work, Cao Yu redirected his focus toward the critique of traditional Chinese culture, returning to his most familiar territory with deeper insight and more masterful technique. This paper employs close textual reading to investigate the structural composition of *Beijingren*, and further explores Cao Yu's new achievements in creation through the themes of "poetic imagery" and "silence." It concludes that beneath the desolate poetic structure lies a glimmer of hope and light in Cao Yu's view of reality, and that the true dramatic essence of *Beijingren* emerges in the stillness of its scenes.

Keywords: *Beijingren*; poetic structure; situational analysis; static scenes.

1 Introduction

The creation of poetic structure is a challenge Cao Yu sought to address in *Beijingren*, and it represents the artistic peak of his dramatic work. His style no longer aimed at the dramatic effects of his earlier plays but instead evoked a prose-like quality reminiscent of Chekhov.

If we examine the dramatic structures of Cao Yu's earlier representative works: *Thunderstorm* follows a closed structure, *Sunrise* adopts a portraiture-style structure, and *The Wilderness* employs an expressionist dramatic structure. In *Beijingren*, Cao Yu once again deconstructed his own style, opting for a poetic structure that unfolds gently and culminates in an open-ended conclusion, demonstrating his artistic foresight. This paper, from the perspective of structural analysis, provides a brief analysis of *Beijingren*'s structural composition, focusing on its poetic structure and static scenes.

2 Nurturing Hope Amidst a Desolate Poetic Structure

Cao Yu's deliberate crafting of the poetic time-space environment at the beginning of each scene in *Beijingren* reveals his deep intention. The innovative use of poetic structure is a bold experiment in *Beijingren*, one that proved highly successful. This technique surpasses the dramatic intensity found in *Thunderstorm* in its subtlety. By

abandoning the overt dramatic effects of his earlier works, Cao Yu created more appropriate settings for each play. The temporal environments in each scene are not hastily constructed; instead, they carry profound meaning. For instance, while the time-space framework of *Sunrise* spans from the late hours of one night to the morning of the following day, in *Beijingers*, Cao Yu elevates the poetic atmosphere to new heights.

The first scene transports the audience into the ambiance of an old aristocratic family in traditional Beijing: "It is nearing noon on Mid-Autumn Festival, in the small flower hall of the old Zeng family residence in Beijing. Everything remains eerily quiet... Looking out from the back row of bright, open windows in the large flower hall, one can see a few white clouds floating leisurely across the azure sky." [8] This environmental description reflects the Zeng family's serene demeanor, seemingly unaffected by any major events. The stage directions meticulously detail the layout and furnishings of the flower hall, portraying an atmosphere of scholarly refinement. The season is early autumn in Beijing, and the clear sky mirrors the ostensibly prosperous and hopeful lives of the Zeng family, despite their status as a declining feudal household. At this moment, the family appears to be thriving, much like the bright autumn weather, exuding vitality and hope.[1]

On the other hand, autumn also foreshadows the harshness of winter. Cao Yu places this chilling season in the background, allowing events to unfold silently. By the second scene, the atmosphere has entirely shifted: "Near the Zeng residence, all is as silent as death..." [8] In this scene, Cao Yu uses adjectives in the stage directions to convey the characters' trajectories and employs Zeng Wenqing's dialogue to evoke a desolate and bleak mood that pervades the entire play. [3] Zeng Ting recites Ouyang Xiu's *Ode to the Sounds of Autumn*, with its melancholy tone suggesting a gradual amplification of sadness and the fading of hope. However, this alone is insufficient; Zeng Wenqing follows up by reciting Lu You's *The Hairpin Phoenix*, invoking the tragic love story of Lu You and Tang Wan, thereby drawing a parallel to his ill-fated relationship with his cousin. This tragic state, however, is largely self-inflicted; had Zeng Wenqing shown the same boldness in love and hate as Qiu Hu and Jinzi, his fate might have been less pitiable. Additionally, Zeng Wenqing, while professing love for Sufang, still managed to impregnate his wife, underscoring his spinelessness and moral weakness.

The first scene of Act Three occurs over a month after Act Two. Although winter has not yet arrived, the deepening autumn brings an increasingly desolate atmosphere. The decline and coldness hang over the Zeng family, affecting both the audience's perception and emotions. At this point, the stage directions delve deeper. The bugle calls in Act Three are drawn from Cao Yu's childhood memories: "Through the misty dust comes the sound of a bugler on the city wall, still not returned to camp. The lonely bugle, distant yet close, strikes the heart with an indescribable sense of melancholy, as if a sentimental ghost were mourning the irrevocable past. There is regret, sorrow, filled with resentment and longing, trembling in the chill air." [8] The house itself has been overrun by "rats," a reflection of the pervasive sense of decay and ruin. In this scene, Zeng Wenqing proves himself to be a pigeon that can never fly, and after years of waiting and confusion, Sufang finally sees him for who he truly is, deciding to leave the family and face the unknown future. Act Three, Scene Two, serves as the play's con-

clusion, portraying the darkness before dawn. However, even in this final darkness, hope is not entirely extinguished; it is instead placed in the hands of Ruizhen and Sufang, who embody the promise of new life and vitality.

In a sense, *Beijingren* is a deeply tragic play. It begins on a bright autumn morning and ends in the "darkness before dawn" of late autumn, mirroring the natural cycle of decline that follows a peak. Through a gradual, life-like progression, Cao Yu portrays the final month of the Zeng family's decline, from its height to its nadir, achieving a harmony between nature and fate. This imbues the play with a poetic rhythm, offering subtle insights into the spiritual and emotional harmony of humanity. Although *Beijingren* contains much sorrow, its open-ended conclusion leaves room for the unknown, suggesting that what appears to be the end may in fact be a beginning. At the end, unresolved questions linger: Will Ruizhen, having escaped an unhappy marriage, find herself trapped in another? What will Zeng Siyi do next, now that her husband is dead, and her daughter-in-law has left? Can Jiang Tai and Zeng Wencai continue to eke out an existence in the Zeng household? And how will Zeng Hao explain the loss of the coffin that had been his sole emotional anchor to his father? Despite these unanswered questions, the overall sense of hope remains intact. [6] When the characters symbolizing light step into the bright stage, the loveless marriage ends, Zeng Hao's coffin is removed, and Sufang leaves the household. While Zeng Wenqing's death is confirmed, he perishes as a redundant, peripheral figure, his worth as a free individual having vanished the moment he returned home in disgrace. His suicide is merely a fitting conclusion to his story. Tragedy evokes pity and fear by depicting the destruction of something valuable. In *Thunderstorm*, several characters representing vitality—Sifeng and Zhou Chong—meet their deaths. However, the ending of *Beijingren* offers hope: the unhappy marriage, opium addiction, and the ancestral coffin—symbols of misfortune—disappear, and hope gestures toward the audience. [2]

When *Beijingren* was performed in Chongqing, it received considerable praise. Liu Yazi offered a poetic summary of the play's theme: "The old society has collapsed; a new world is rising! Only you, the great Beijingers, carry the glory of your ancestors, while also revealing the future of the era." The bright future that Cao Yu wished to emphasize was clearly communicated to both the audience and critics. The characters in the Zeng household secretly pack their belongings with tears and pain, but in their hearts, they hold onto hope for a brighter future. In this regard, Cao Yu is merciful, not wishing to leave his audience mired in darkness and obscurity. He places the promise of a bright future directly into the stage directions, echoing Wang Bo's poem at the beginning: "A bosom friend afar brings a distant land near." [9] He believed that the Communist Party or the workers could lead people toward the light.

3 Stirring A Great Wave Amidst the Undercurrent of Silence

Beijingren is a classic example of using static scenes to depict the climax of the play. In Act Three, Scene One, Sufang, who has placed her hopes on Zeng Wenqing, decides to leave the stagnant household. She once believed that Zeng Wenqing would leave the family to truly live, and for this, she even resolved to stay at home, unburdening him.

Sufang firmly believed that Zeng Wenqing would never return unless the sky fell. However, Zeng Wenqing did come back. When faced with his defeated return, Sufang simply says, "You're back!" [8] and then stands in stunned silence on stage, as "a distant bugle call trembles forlornly in the wind." [8]

Before this moment, Cao Yu had already employed techniques such as contrast, foreshadowing, and amplification to fully showcase Sufang's determination and confidence in Zeng Wenqing's departure, portraying her complete understanding and support. Sufang believed that Zeng Wenqing would rather die than return to the Zeng family. Hence, she was willing to care for both the things he loved and those he disliked because "even the things he did not love were still once dear to him!" [8] However, Zeng Wenqing had long become a pigeon unable to fly, incapable of withstanding the winds of the outside world. Nonetheless, Sufang was willing to endure life in this death-like feudal household for someone like him, convinced that such a sacrifice was worthwhile. However, the stronger her determination and confidence, the more devastating Zeng Wenqing's return becomes. This emotional dissonance is too subtle to be easily articulated reality and ideals often clash, and such feelings are delicate and grating. Cao Yu was acutely aware of the characters' reactions in such a state, so he made Sufang stand motionless, allowing the scene to achieve a "silence speaks louder than words" effect. This restrained expression makes the underlying, indescribable sorrow—"unbearable yet inevitable"—even more poignant, leaving a lump in the audience's throat. Here, Cao Yu skillfully abandons the climactic techniques of *Thunderstorm*, where electric shocks and gunshots drive the action, instead letting Sufang stand still. The emotional turmoil in her heart becomes part of the audience's imagination, allowing each viewer to empathize with Sufang's inner storm. This is truly a masterful stroke of simplicity.

In *On Theatricality*, there is a section devoted to the concept that "pauses are also actions": "In a script, a character's actions are not isolated; they are the 'effect' of preceding actions and the cause' of subsequent ones." [10] People often endure and respond to inner turmoil with silence. Silence has weight; it gradually increases pressure, causing emotions to sink into shadows, giving rise to fear, anxiety, or other psychological responses. Whether a pause carries dramatic weight depends on the character's psychological state at that moment. To make such pauses theatrically effective, certain principles must be followed—preparing a series of actions to support them. Hence, through Sufang's actions, Cao Yu captures true theatricality. In the script, Sufang's pause is not without reason; Cao Yu had already laid sufficient groundwork, demonstrating that this series of actions is not isolated. Her silence is the culmination of previous sacrifices and expectations, and it becomes the cause for subsequent actions. It foreshadows Sufang's next step—leaving the house. Leaving signifies that her years of sacrifice and feelings for Zeng Wenqing have been in vain, directly leading to his suicide. Everything is linked in a chain.

Cao Yu was influenced by Chekhov to some extent when writing *Beijingren*. He once mentioned in *On Beijingren* that he admired Chekhov's plays and acknowledged being influenced by him. Cao Yu abandoned the well-made play format, placing the tension-filled scenes offstage. Thus, the ending of each act in *Beijingren* comes earlier than in *Thunderstorm*. [4] For instance, when the debt collectors arrive during the

family reunion dinner, the scene abruptly ends. In Act Two, after Zeng Hao is carried away following his stroke, Zeng Wenqing silently exits the stage holding his old clothes. Cao Yu did not depict the chaotic scene of everyone fussing over Zeng Hao's stroke; instead, he focused on Zeng Wenqing's silent departure, bringing the act to a close. The ending of *Beijingren* is succinct and restrained. Cao Yu avoids the direct portrayal of suicide found in *The Wilderness* and *Sunrise*, placing Zeng Wenqing's death entirely offstage, as quietly as a rat falling. This technique reflects Cao Yu's intent to downplay Zeng Wenqing's death's impact on others. Zeng Wencai lightly tells Zeng Hao that it was just a rat causing a disturbance. The handling of the ending invites the audience to imagine endlessly, while the stage retains a deep sense of poetic beauty. Cao Yu was no longer pursuing overt dramatic effects but was instead focusing on meticulously portraying the progression from beginning to end. Once the process is shown, the ending becomes self-evident. Cao Yu preferred to leave space for the audience and the stage, rather than filling the scenes to capacity. [5][7]

4 Conclusion

Every exceptional playwright has their own distinct domain, and Cao Yu consistently pushed the boundaries of self-improvement within his own. The endings that once fascinated the young Cao Yu—those where characters either die or go mad—are completely abandoned in *Beijingren*, allowing him to achieve a Chekhovian effect. This is the style of a mature playwright, capable of depicting grand tragedies in everyday life without bringing the brutal climax to the stage. Through a relatively open and poetic dramatic structure and a light yet deliberate writing style, Cao Yu intricately portrays the collapse of a feudal family, leading to an inevitable conclusion.

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