

# ORIENS EXTREMUS

KULTUR, GESCHICHTE, REFLEXION IN OSTASIEN



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Redaktion/Editing: Dorothee Schaab-Hanke, Martin Hanke

Website: [www.oriens-extremus.org](http://www.oriens-extremus.org)

Articles appearing in this journal are abstracted and indexed in:  
“Historical Abstracts” and “America: History and Life”.

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Typesetting: CHINA Buchservice, Gossenberg

Printed on permanent/durable paper of Nordland GmbH, Dörpen/Ems

Printing and binding by  Hubert & Co., Göttingen

Printed in Germany

[www.harrassowitz-verlag.de](http://www.harrassowitz-verlag.de)

ISSN 0030-5197

ISBN 978-2-447-11549-0

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NEW DRAMATURGIES ABOUT CHINA'S FIRST MARXIST:  
A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF CONTEMPORARY BIOGRAPHICAL PLAYS  
ON LI DAZHAO

ANNA STECHER

Introduction

If an individual is interested in the history of Marxism in China, he or she will not be able to avoid one person – Li Dazhao. Inspired by the Russian October Revolution, the then twenty-nine-year-old chief librarian of Beijing University openly declared his sympathy for Marxism in 1918, with the publication of a number of articles in leading intellectual journals. At the same time, he began to organize Marxist study groups, and one of them instigated the interest in Marxism of a young assistant librarian named Mao Runzhi, later Mao Zedong. Since, as a true Marxist, Li Dazhao worked hard to combine theory and practice, he became involved in organizing worker unions and strikes, as well as in the foundation of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (although he was not present in person at the founding moment in July 1921 in Shanghai). In the following years, he became the northern leader of the underground communist movement in China; as such he also drafted the First United Front with Sun Yat-sen. In 1927 he was captured and killed by the warlord Zhang Zuolin.

In this way, a biographical sketch can be written, bringing together the most accessible information on Li Dazhao. From these lines, two things may not appear surprising: first, Li Dazhao has been venerated with the greatest honors by generations of Chinese leaders as “the pioneer of the Chinese communist movement, a great Marxist, an outstanding proletarian revolutionary, one of the main founders of the Communist Party of China.”<sup>1</sup> Second, despite their various interests, scholars generally agree that Li Dazhao fully deserves the title of being “China’s first Marxist.”<sup>2</sup>

There is so much concordance, one may think that it is not worth studying the literary or theatrical representations of Li Dazhao’s life. If his destiny is compared with that of Chen Duxiu, his co-founder of the CCP, this would sound plausible: while Li Dazhao became one of the first communist martyrs, Chen Duxiu was expelled from the Party only a few years later, and he died alone and labeled as a traitor. For decades, he was ignored or

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1 Hu Jintao 1999; Jiang Zemin 1989; Xi Jinping 2009. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of quotations from non-English sources are mine.

2 Meisner 1967, xiii; Pozzana 1994, 8.

represented as a negative character and has only been approached in a new way in recent years.<sup>3</sup> None of this can be said about Li Dazhao, who has always been highly praised, except for a short period during the Cultural Revolution. However, while the “official” representations of Li Dazhao did not undergo any fundamental changes throughout the twentieth century, it is remarkable that recent representations on the theatre stage provide entirely new dramaturgies on his life: instead of presenting Li Dazhao as a revolutionary hero, they show him as an intellectual, family man, and even a historical character who can be questioned. Moreover, the characters he interacts with have become more and more ordinary: while older stories emphasized his relationship with Mao Zedong, Sun Yat-sen, and other well-known historical figures, recent productions have privileged family and friends. In addition, the events from his life chosen for the stage appear to be variable: in place of glorious moments of founding organizations and fighting for his cause, the new plays prefer dramatically complex situations or even renounce historical events completely. Finally, beyond his most famous Marxist writings, these plays show an interest in his pre- or non-Marxist texts, and especially his poetry. These are not organized into conventional heroic stories, but rather into theatrical experiments where different techniques of storytelling and representation are applied.

How can these new dramaturgies be explained? In his *Handbuch Biographie*, Christian Klein mentions two reasons why a biographer may decide to write a new story about a person whose life has already been depicted. On the one hand, the biographer may be unhappy with the existing biographies, maybe because he or she thinks they emphasize the wrong points or are too strongly influenced by the philosophy dominant at the time they were produced. On the other hand, the new biographer may have gained access to new sources and could be interested in providing corrections to earlier work, enlarging the context for discussion or providing new emphasis.<sup>4</sup> In the case of Li Dazhao we could argue that these explanations are both appropriate: scholarship since the 1990s, for instance, sheds light on his pre-Marxist life and thought, while earlier scholars were more interested in studying his Marxist period.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, newer studies explore Li Dazhao’s pre-Marxist writing, such as his long poem *Spring*, arguing that it was not an immature composition – as it was considered to be in older studies – but a highly modern piece of literature.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, a biographer or editor writing since the late 1990s has access to

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3 Chen 2016b, 56–100.

4 Klein 2009, 201.

5 In 1989 Zhu Chengjia published a study in 500 pages of Li Dazhao’s early years; see Zhu Chengjia 1989. Recent biographies in general attach more importance to Li Dazhao’s early years; see Zhu Zhimin 2009.

6 Zhu Chengjia 1989, 359–386. Pozzana 1994, 2002.

many more sources than one writing in 1980. For instance, *Li Dazhao's Collected Works* (*Li Dazhao quanji*), published in 1999 in four volumes, contains texts from all periods of his life.<sup>7</sup> By contrast, the 1959 edition of *Selected Works of Li Dazhao* (*Li Dazhao xuanji*) contains far fewer texts.<sup>8</sup> Such considerations certainly affect biographical dramas, which are often inspired by literary or scholarly works. However, the situation in this case is perhaps even more complex. To connect to Klein, we could argue that there is another reason why the story of Li Dazhao is written differently in contemporary China: the biographers, their positions, and their audiences have changed as well. The question of Li Dazhao in China is connected to fundamental political issues, which are simultaneously issues regarding the CCP and its history.<sup>9</sup> While “official” representations aim to tell positive stories of stability and continuity, the theatre in this case fulfils two tasks simultaneously: on the one hand, it undoubtedly propagates the image of a politician who lived and worked at the dawn of Chinese communism. On the other, functioning as a so-called mirror of society, it captures and tackles the fundamental changes that are going on in present-day Chinese society. In this regard, theatre people often seem to be driven by a similar approach to that described by Claudia Pozzana in 2002 in which she reflects that:

Though it would be misleading to say that we find ourselves in the exact same state as Li Dazhao, it is true that, different as our immediate circumstances may be, we share with him the general decay in the framework of cultural references that previously situated our politics: this is the malaise, if not despair, that we as progressive intellectuals experience, and that forges our kinship with the intellectuals of that other time.<sup>10</sup>

As will be seen, when Li Dazhao enters the theatre stage, he is never a character of a hundred years ago; rather, he is always a character of today. Therefore, studying contemporary drama on Li Dazhao does not only mean dealing with a topic solely connected to questions of history of Marxism and the CCP, but it especially means engaging with these issues in the context of life experiences and culture of the present.

Due to the complexity of the topic, I will not be able to provide detailed information regarding all the areas the plays are connected with or regarding all the theatre plays available.<sup>11</sup> However, I aim at describing some of the most innovative dramaturgies on Li

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7 Li Dazhao 1999.

8 Li Dazhao 1959.

9 See Spakowski 1993, 10. “Mit Li Dazhao sind Grundfragen der Geschichte des chinesischen Kommunismus und der chinesischen Marxismusinterpretation berührt, die auch noch in der Distanz von Jahrzehnten das ideologische Selbstverständnis und die ideologische Legitimation der sozialistischen Systeme der Sowjetunion und besonders der Volksrepublik China berühren.”

10 Pozzana 2002, 270.

11 In order to provide a more complete picture, it would be necessary to focus also on other

Dazhao and exploring which dramaturgical choices are made by the producers of the plays and how they affect the content of the story. What do they say about Li Dazhao's life? How do they tell it? What does this mean for the Li Dazhao story as a whole? To provide a better understanding, I compare three different plays with one another, as well as with an earlier representation of Li Dazhao. However, before explaining my approach in more detail, I will introduce the three plays in question.

In the main part of this article, I focus on the following dramatic works: *Li Dazhao*, a play written by Yao Yuan, directed by Wang Zunxi, and staged by the Drama Troupe of the General Political Department (Zongzheng huaju tuan) in 1991; *In Search of Li Dazhao* (*Xunzhao Li Dazhao*), a play written by Meng Bing, directed by Gong Xiaodong, and staged by the Drama Theatre of Henan (Henen sheng huaju yuan) in 2011; and *Mister Dazhao* (*Dazhao xiansheng*), a musical from 2018, written by Tuo Lu, directed by Zhou Yingchen, and produced at Beijing University. It is worth noting that both the 1991 and 2011 dramas have connections to military theatre troupes, which are often considered to produce exclusively propagandistic theatre. However, as has already been pointed out elsewhere regarding so-called main-melody drama, these two productions also prove to be driven by an extremely challenging spirit of intellectual inquiry.<sup>12</sup> Yao Yuan, the author of the 1991 drama, is known for creating highly complex characters that defy simplistic interpretation as good or bad. This is the case for *Shang Yang*, Yao Yuan's famous work on the eponymous statesman of the Warring States period, which has been extremely successful from 1996 to the present day.<sup>13</sup> It is also the case for the play *The Occupation of Nanjing* (*Lunxian*, 2007), which breaks with the usual representation of "good Chinese" and "bad Japanese" characters, instead offering characters faced with a broad spectrum of choices that can somehow all be understood.<sup>14</sup>

Meng Bing, the author of the 2011 play, is famous for telling stories about major political figures and topics, such as Mao Zedong or the history of the CCP, using extremely challenging dramaturgies. The main character of *Mao Zedong's Reveries at Xibaipo* (*Mao Zedong zai Xibaipo de changxiang*, 2009) is Mao Zedong himself, sitting in a chair in 1948 – that is, one year before the foundation of the People's Republic of China. In his thoughts, he consults with a number of eminent historical characters (e.g. Stalin or Li Zicheng), who take the stage one after another in an atmosphere between reality and

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dramatic and operatic productions, on biographical movies, as well as on the two TV series, *Li Dazhao* and *Uphold Morality and Justice with Iron Shoulders* (*Tie jian dan dao yi*) which have been produced respectively in 1989 and 2009.

12 Chen 2016a, 86 ff; Roberts 2016, 62–63.

13 For an in-depth discussion on *Shang Yang*, see Roberts 2016, 61–78.

14 For an introduction to *The Occupation of Nanjing* as well as a German translation, see Gissenwehler 2018, 125–179.



dream.<sup>15</sup> In *Who Dominates the World?* (*Shei zhu chengfu*, also known as *Kai tian pi di*), Meng Bing depicts a young man from contemporary China who travels back in time and becomes involved in the first congress of the CCP in 1921. He dramatizes a number of thrilling questions, for instance, regarding the participants of this meeting, many aspects of which are still wrapped in a veil of mystery.<sup>16</sup>

While Yao Yuan was born in the 1940s, and Meng Bing in the 1950s, a younger generation of artists produced the musical *Mister Dazhao*. The playwright Tuo Lu was born in the 1980s, while Zhou Yingchen, the director, was born in the 1970s; one may also note that they are both women. Zhou Yingchen is a professor of music at Beijing University; she is also the director of a number of traditional and modern musical productions. Tuo Lu is a theatre critic and writer. Her plays have been staged at a number of theatre festivals, such as the Wuzhen Theatre Festival, Beijing International Youth Theatre Festival, and Nanluoguxiang Theatre Festival.<sup>17</sup>

To gain a better understanding of the innovations of these three recent productions, it is useful to analyze them in comparison with older representations. Thus before analyzing the plays, Section 1 introduces a literary biography of Li Dazhao – *Biography of Li Dazhao* (*Li Dazhao zhuan*), published in 1979. Since my search for an older dramatic text proved fruitless, I decided to work with this book published before the inauguration of the reform era. As is discussed in Section 2, literary biographies in print and biographical dramas on stage and screen are often intimately connected, and it is thus reasonable to examine them together. In addition, literary biographies – as well as other historical texts – often follow a clear dramaturgy. The only fundamental differences seem to be that biographical dramas or cinema tell stories in a different way and usually do not exceed two hours. Thus dramatists and stage and screen writers – more than the literary biographer – must make a more rigorous assessment of what material from the subject's life to include,<sup>18</sup> and, we might add, what to exclude. This raises important questions: why, and how, are certain scenes from a life represented and others not? How does the auteur decide what to bring into focus and what to leave aside? How far does the dramatic representation of a life answer to other demands – made by audiences, sponsors, the state, and society at large.

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15 For a discussion of *Mao Zedong's Reveries at Xibaipo*, see Chen 2016b, 116 ff.

16 For a discussion of *Who Dominates the World*, see Chen 2016b, 126 ff. Besides these two plays, Chen Xiaomei discusses a number of other Meng Bing plays in Chen 2016b, 107 ff. and Chen 2016a, 79–96. A German translation of *And the Last Fight Let Us Face* (*Zhe shi zuibou de douzheng*), a very important Meng Bing play from 2007, is included in the collection of drama translations *Mittendrin* with the title *Auf zum letzten Gefecht* (Chen and Knopp 2015, 229–277)

17 *Dazhao xiansheng* 2018.

18 Schößler 2009, 143 ff.

In addition to literary biographies there are other types of texts intimately connected with the three biographical plays discussed in this paper. First, there are scholarly accounts of Li Dazhao, his life and thought,<sup>19</sup> and second, there is Chinese historiography, especially regarding the CCP. Bringing these strands together will be a future project of mine. For this paper, while occasionally touching on questions regarding biographical literature and research on Li Dazhao and the CCP's history, my focus is mainly limited to the dramaturgies of the plays.

My approach is, first, inspired by research on the literary, dramatic, and cinematic representations of historical personalities, as carried out in and outside China in recent years.<sup>20</sup> In English, Xiaomei Chen has published extensively on the representation of Chen Duxiu, Mao Zedong, and Deng Xiaoping, especially in the context of propaganda.<sup>21</sup> She has also examined two of the plays discussed in this paper, but she has done so in different contexts. In one study she examines the 1991 play *Li Dazhao* by Yao Yuan in terms of its representation of Chen Duxiu.<sup>22</sup> In another she discusses *In Search of Li Dazhao* (2011) in the context of other Meng Bing plays.<sup>23</sup> In these studies Xiaomei Chen deals with a vast temporal span, providing extensive texts and sources and exhibiting a detailed knowledge of her subject. Here we will focus on an in-depth comparison of a limited number of dramaturgies on the life of the same historical figure; naturally, we may sometimes come to a different conclusion regarding the meaning of a specific text. While Xiaomei Chen especially illuminates the dimensions of marriage and love in Yao Yuan's *Li Dazhao*,<sup>24</sup> the conclusion of my research is that the family and love scenes may be just one aspect of this life narration. If we compare Yao Yuan's dramaturgy with the other stories, it is especially striking how much space is given to the political activities Li Dazhao was involved with in the 1920s and how they are depicted as tragically unsuccessful. Further, if we consider that, in this 1991 play, Li Dazhao is essentially depicted as an intellectual, we may conclude that this play perhaps could be understood as a mirroring of contemporary events in China that culminated in the military suppression of the Tiananmen Square protests in June 1989.

Second, I argue that plays about the life of a historical person are fundamentally biographical texts. As such, they are in line with the long Chinese tradition of biography,

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19 An introduction to this complex research field has been provided by Nicola Spakowski; see Spakowski 1993.

20 Inspired by other scholars of the representation of historical personalities on stage and screen, my doctoral dissertation focused on Lu Xun; see Stecher 2012.

21 Chen 2016b.

22 Chen 2016b, 84–86.

23 Chen 2016a, 89–92.

24 Chen 2016a, 84–86.

which was habitually connected to historiography and studied as such.<sup>25</sup> However, as Marjorie Dryburgh points out in a recent study, “despite this extensive and intensive use of life narrative texts in research, Chinese life writing practices received, until recently, relatively little scholarly attention outside China.”<sup>26</sup> This applies even more to biographical dramas, which have been studied almost exclusively as so-called historical plays, or plays where history is used to comment on the present.<sup>27</sup> However, although this could be one dimension, as exemplified in the 1991 play *Li Dazhao*, in general contemporary biographical plays are not reducible to a code that gives access to only one message. On the contrary, they play with many different and possible meanings. When Rudolf Wagner describes the historical plays of the late 1950s and early 1960s as a “common language”<sup>28</sup> which theatre makers used and audiences understood, communication through historical personalities on stage in contemporary China appears in many aspects to work quite differently. In addition, comparing biographies is something scholars of ancient Chinese historiography do to understand what specific texts communicate. This is exemplified best in Hans van Ess’s recent work *Politik und Geschichtsschreibung im alten China: Panama i-t’ung*.<sup>29</sup> This comparative approach is also valuable for contemporary Chinese biographies. Also, today, more than as sources for historical facts, contemporary Chinese biographical plays have mainly connected to their respective present.

In his *Handbuch Biographie*, Christian Klein suggests analyzing biographies as stories in a narratological way.<sup>30</sup> Inspired by his approach, I try to understand which events, persons, works, dimensions, and so on from Li Dazhao’s life have been chosen for the plays, as well as how these moments are presented and organized to form a complete story. It is also Klein’s suggestion to work with Hayden White’s famous “modes of plotment” to understand a biographical text.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, romance, tragedy, satire, and comedy prove to be especially suitable when applied to contemporary Chinese biographical drama. In the following sections, I argue that the 1991 play *Li Dazhao* exhibits the fundamental aspects of the tragic form, that the 2011 *In Search of Li Dazhao* is inspired by a dramaturgy of satire, and that the 2018 musical *Mister Dazhao* is a comedy in many parts. The 1979 biography and the “official representations”, however, show a clear dramaturgy of romance. It could be argued that this generic choice actually means moving in the opposite direction to White, who applied concepts from drama to historiography. However, I hope to prove

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25 Dryburgh and Dauncey 2013, 1; van Ess, 2003, 15 ff.

26 Dryburgh and Dauncey 2013, 1.

27 Wagner, 1990.

28 Wagner, 1990, 319.

29 van Ess 2014, 1–9

30 Klein 2009, 199–219.

31 Klein 2009, 209.

that not only can applying White's concepts in the study of contemporary Chinese plays about a personality like Li Dazhao improve our understanding of Chinese theatre, but it can also be useful for understanding Chinese dramaturgies of history writing.

### Biography of Li Dazhao (1979): A Romance

Even if the biography published in 1979 is presented here as an “older story” compared with the “new stories” published ten, twenty, or thirty years later, this book was certainly highly innovative at the time of its first conception and publication, since it concerned a leading personality associated with the CPC. From the “Editorial Afterword,” dated January 1979, we learn that this biography was originally promoted by the Communist Party secretary and the Communist Party School of the City of Beijing as early as 1960; that is, nearly twenty years before it was finally published. However, due to the Cultural Revolution and the fact that “the anti-party group of Lin Biao and the ‘Gang of Four’ deeply hated the old generation of proletarian revolutionaries,”<sup>32</sup> the project could not be completed. One of the main promoters of the book, Zhao Zhengfu, died during the campaigns of the Cultural Revolution, and one of the criticisms made of him concerned his engagement in the cause of publishing Li Dazhao's biography. As is the case with other books published at the time, instead of an author's personal name on the front page, we find the expression, “*Li Dazhao zhuan bianxie zu*” (editing group of the *Biography of Li Dazhao*). More information regarding its members and the changes the group underwent in the twenty years between the book's initiation and publication are given in the afterword, a text written only one month after the implementation of the “Reform and Opening Up” policy of 1978, which finally put a definitive end to the Cultural Revolution era.

In terms of the material selected this biography covers Li Dazhao's whole lifespan. However, it can easily be seen that the authors' focus lies on Li Dazhao's life after he became a Marxist, especially his communist activities – the last ten years of his life. Only seven of the book's 226 pages describe the more than twenty years of his “childhood and youth” (1889–1910); meanwhile, twenty-four pages deal with his experiences and ideological life in Tianjin, Japan, and first years in Beijing, here called the “revolutionary democrat” phase (1910–1917). In addition, even the thirty pages dealing with the twenty-eight years prior to Li Dazhao's conversion to Marxism emphasize the similarity in his character and behavior to the subsequent, and final, ten years of his life, focusing on his revolutionary spirit. For example, Li Dazhao is said to show his revolutionary zeal at the age of twelve, when his idol is the leader of the Taiping uprising: “When I grow up, I want to

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32 *Li Dazhao zhuan bianxie zu* 1979, 265.

become like Hong Xiuquan and overthrow the emperor of the Qing dynasty!”<sup>33</sup> Every following chapter covers only one, two or three years of his life. However, these are described with details and quotations on many pages. Seventeen pages describe him as “the first promoter of Marxism in China” (1918); thirty pages as “one of the leaders of the May Fourth Movement” (1919–1920); thirty-five pages as “one of the founders of the Communist Party of China” (1920–1921), like that he is made part of this event, even though he did not participate in person; thirty-two pages as “leading the northern workers’ movement” (1922–1923); seventeen pages as “promoting the United Front of revolution” (1923–1924); thirty-eight pages on his activities “within the northern storm of revolution” (1924–1926); and twenty pages about his death in 1927, a chapter with the title “High in Virtue and Responsibility: Infinitely in His Greatness.” If we compare this structure to the most common historical representations of early Chinese communism, it seems that every stage in his life echoes an important period in communist history, including the May Fourth Movement, First Party Congress, and First United Front.

If we consider single episodes, we note that events are recounted in a positive light as progressive steps in a long development. This is especially apparent for moments that could easily be recounted in a rather tragic manner or are indeed recounted in this way elsewhere, for example the events surrounding the Beijing Hankou railroad workers strike and its cruel suppression by Wu Peifu in 1923 or the demonstrations against the Duan Qirui government in March 1926 and the subsequent massacre. Within this narrative, they are first mentioned merely as the “February 7th storm” and “3/18 movement.” When we go through the text, we may notice that the cruelties are described and some famous quotations are mentioned, for example Lu Xun’s depiction of March 18, 1926 as “the darkest day since the founding of the Republic.”<sup>34</sup> However, what ultimately prevails in this book is Li Dazhao’s determination to continue the fight. Therefore, more than tragic massacres, the events are described as important revolutionary moments for the cause of communism. The same goes for Li Dazhao’s death, which is followed by a long description of how he will live forever.

The main character, Li Dazhao, is described exclusively in a positive light, without reference to doubts, worries, or questionable decisions. As a “good character,” Li Dazhao is presented as a personality without any ambiguities throughout the book. When characters like Chen Duxiu, Hu Shi, and Zhang Guotao are mentioned, however, it is empha-

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33 *Li Dazhao zhuan* bianxie zu 1979, 5.

34 *Li Dazhao zhuan* bianxie zu 1979. For the English translation of this quotation, see “Roses Without Blooms, Part II (excerpt)”, in Lu Xun 2017, 73. In this edition a translation of Lu Xun’s text “In Memory of Liu Hezhen” can also be found, which Lu Xun wrote to commemorate the student Liu Hezhen who died during the massacre. See Lu Xun 2017, 74–78.

sized that they count among the “negative” figures.<sup>35</sup> A special characterization, however, is given to Mao Zedong: on the one hand, his personal and ideological connection with Li Dazhao is briefly mentioned, and the story is told of how he became assistant librarian to Li at Beijing University and how his meeting with the latter influenced his development toward adopting a Marxist philosophy. On the other hand, quotes from Mao Zedong’s writings, as well as specific mentions of Mao’s political positions, serve as context for showing the validity and correctness of Li Dazhao’s thought and activities.

As is often the case in biographies of revolutionary heroes, Li Dazhao is portrayed exclusively as a political personality, with no private life. Apart from a brief reference to the role of his grandfather in his childhood and his daughter, who witnessed his capture, his life is portrayed as having been fully dedicated to his work for the Party and the communist cause. In the last quarter of the book, he explicitly declares a farewell to family life, saying to his wife,

At this moment I am very busy. From today on I will not have any time to look after my family. You need to become strong; you never have to worry about my life and my well-being, pluck up courage and take the task of raising and educating our children.<sup>36</sup>

The ending of the book describes Li Dazhao’s death on April 28, 1927. His death and last words represent a recurrent and important motif in the plays discussed in next sections. There seems to be no reliable source available regarding the details of his death; therefore, the handling of this moment is fully in the hands of the biographers, and it allows us to gain a better understanding of the strategies of storytelling. In the *Biography of Li Dazhao* the scene of Li’s death reaffirms his revolutionary spirit and activities once more, as well as his firm belief in communism:

Under this very gallows on which he was to be murdered comrade Dazhao made his last impassioned speech, exclaiming aloud: “Long live the Communist Party of China!” He expressed his contempt for death and for the reactionaries and his firm belief in the Party and the cause of communism. He ridiculed his bandit murders as “fishes swimming in a hot pot, which, already half dizzily and unconsciously perform a buffoonery.” He said: “Don’t think that by strangulating me today you can strangulate the great communism itself! We have already nurtured many comrades, like the seeds of red flowers which are spread about everywhere! We firmly believe that communism will achieve its glorious victory in the world and in China!”<sup>37</sup>

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35 This is connected with their historiographical representation at the time. On the representation of Chen Duxiu, see Chen 2016b, 56–100.

36 *Li Dazhao zhuan* bianxie zu 1979, 162.

37 *Li Dazhao zhuan* bianxie zu 1979, 220–221.

With the focus on confidence, faith, and the outlook of the great and bright future of communism, his death is written in a positive and optimistic way. In addition, this is not the actual conclusion of the book. After Li Dazhao's death follow nearly five pages that recount how people mourned him and how his ideas continued to be important for subsequent decades, including the then present day of the late 1970s, "under the correct leadership of the Party central headed by Hua Guofeng."<sup>38</sup> The book is solemnly concluded by a famous quotation from "The Victory of Bolshevism," written in 1918 and one of Li Dazhao's most important Marxist texts: *The earth of the future will be a world of the red flag*.<sup>39</sup> Most likely, this quotation was chosen to demonstrate that Li Dazhao was right. However, probably nobody could know that the decisions taken at the Third Plenum of the CCP's Central Committee, held in December 1978, would have taken China in a different direction. Since this quotation will be discussed again at the end of this paper, the reader should keep it in mind.

To sum up some of the central aspects of this story, the 1979 biography recounts Li Dazhao's life in a linear way, with a clear direction and development; the narration is internally consistent down to the last detail. It aims to paint a complete picture without any questionable gaps. It depicts Li Dazhao as an official person, a model Marxist in practice and theory and a heroic revolutionary without any doubts or any real private life, exclusively in a positive light. In addition, the characters and the environment around him are painted in black and white, good and bad. The scene of "Li Dazhao's death," likewise, shows him as a revolutionary and firm believer in communism until the last moment of his life. At the same time, this is not presented as an ending, but instead, as an event situated at the dawn of the history of Chinese communism. Hayden White's description of romance seems fully appropriate to the dramaturgy of this biography: "It is a drama of the triumph of good over evil, of virtue over vice, of light over darkness, and of the ultimate transcendence of man over the world in which he was imprisoned by the Fall."<sup>40</sup>

### *Li Dazhao* (1991): A Tragedy

As Yao Yuan points out, his play *Li Dazhao* was originally conceived as an adaptation of Wang Chaozhu's huge and extremely well-received literary biography, first published in

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38 *Li Dazhao zhuan* bianxie zu 1979, 224.

39 Here I have adapted the translation by Frank Ruda and Claudia Pozzana, see Li Dazhao 2017, 247. "The world of the future will be a world of the red flag!" However, I have substituted the first occurrence "world" with "earth" in order to keep the variation form the Chinese source text: 试看将来的环球, 必是赤旗的世界! See *Li Dazhao zhuan* bianxie zu 1979, 226; Li Dazhao 1999, vol. III, 110.

40 White 1973, 9.

October 1989. This is not a scholarly account of Li Dazhao, but rather a text composed in a lively way, with many dialogues. Indeed, like a novel, it does not feature a table of contents summarizing the most important facts but is instead simply arranged in ten chapters with numbered subchapters. The reader, then, learns what happens to Li Dazhao and the other characters only as she reads on; the general dramaturgy is not displayed in advance but remains in suspense. Furthermore, Wang presents many different opinions and points of view, often without adding explanations or making judgments. Likewise, he focuses on multiple moments in the daily life of Li Dazhao, as well as on many texts written by Li or other persons that appear to be loosely connected to the rest of the story. Finally, Wang tells the story more from a personal and emotional – rather than from an “official” – point of view.<sup>41</sup>

How, though, is it even possible to adapt 800 pages of text into a two-hour stage drama? According to Yao Yuan, when working on the first outline of the play, he rejected the suggestion of focusing on one significant episode in Li Dazhao’s life.<sup>42</sup> Instead, he chose to tell a story running from 1915 until Li Dazhao’s death in 1927. Therefore, after a first impression of Li Dazhao’s meeting with Chen Duxiu in Japan, we see him, consecutively, as chief librarian at Beijing University; as an activist in the May Fourth Movement; in discussion with Hu Shi about issues and “isms”; as an organizer of Marxist study groups; as a coordinator involved in the events leading ultimately to the February 7th massacre of 1923; as a participant in the demonstrations of 1926, which were to be remembered as the March 18th massacre; and as an intellectual whose life becomes increasingly dangerous, culminating in his violent death. In addition to the wide timeframe, the drama involves many different spaces (Japan, Beijing University, government, home, Luoyang, and Beijing again as his place of execution). In contrast to the 1979 literary biography discussed in the previous section, and similar to the book by Wang Chaozhu, Yao Yuan’s play does not aim to provide a complete story. Different scenes, though in chronological order, appear to be only loosely connected, one following quickly on the other. In total, we are presented with twenty-two scenes in two hours. To provide a better understanding, a voice sometimes gives short introductions or conclusions by mentioning the historical context. However, some moments and images remain disconnected, open to different interpretations.

The arrangement of the characters also shows that the drama does not aim to depict everything in detail, but rather, to indicate different positions. No less than twenty-seven characters are mentioned in the *dramatis personae*, and it may well be asked how even a

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41 Wang Chaozhu 1989.

42 Yao Yuan 1993b, 25. He also mentions that the suggestion was to focus on Li Dazhao’s meetings with Sun Yat-sen which led to the First United Front between the Communists and the Kuomintang. Interestingly, this episode does not feature in play at all.



well-informed audience would be able to follow the story. However, breaking with the realist tradition, Yao Yuan directs all these characters take the stage at the beginning of the play and provide a short self-introduction one after the other – a theatrical measure that, according to auteur, was inspired by a technique from traditional Chinese theatre.<sup>43</sup> For the performance of these introductions, the characters are organized into categories: first come the politicians, Xu Shichang, Wu Peifu, Yang Yuting, and Zhang Zuolin; next are the intellectuals, Cai Yuanpei, Hu Shi, and Chen Duxiu; the first communists follow, Zhao Erkang, Qin Jun, Gao Junyu, and Zhang Guotao; next comes the unhappy couple, bound together through an arranged marriage, Liu Yu and Chen Shu; then come Li Dazhao's friends, Zhang Shizhao and his wife Wu Ruonan; there follow the family, Li's wife, Zhao Renlan, and daughter, Li Xinghua; then, there are some rather ambiguous characters, Yang Du and Bai Jianwu, who are in some ways friends and in others enemies of Li Dazhao; finally, before Li Dazhao himself comes to the stage, the young Mao Zedong, who introduces himself by emphasizing the connection between himself, Li Dazhao, and the CCP:

I am Mao Runzhi. In May 1919, I became an assistant librarian at the Beijing University. The reason for the foundation of the Communist Party of China was that Marxism came to China. Therefore, we need to mention the first propagator of Marxism, the forerunner of the communist movement in China – comrade Li Dazhao.<sup>44</sup>

Only at the end of this long gallery of characters does Li Dazhao take the stage in a traditional scholar's gown, providing a short summary of his life before he went to Japan – where the beginning of the play takes place.<sup>45</sup> However, this gallery does not just serve as a first sketch of the characters; it can also be seen as the program for the play, which works with a multiplicity of viewpoints: while the character of Mao Zedong establishes the connection to the older or official stories about Li Dazhao, for their part, family and friends display an emotional approach to the main character's private life. The intellectuals are presented with their different approaches and worldviews throughout the play, while the politicians appear as clownish characters merely driven by their search for power. Li Dazhao himself does not appear as a supernatural revolutionary hero, but as a very human, and in some ways even traditional, character.<sup>46</sup>

In contrast to the 1979 biography, Li Dazhao is presented in Yao Yuan's *Li Dazhao* essentially as an intellectual; indeed this has been mentioned by the director.<sup>47</sup> Thus in contrast to earlier representations, Li is not so much the revolutionary or founder of the

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43 Yao Yuan 1993b, 25.

44 Yao Yuan 1993a, 3.

45 Yao Yuan 1993a, 3.

46 For other traditional aspects Li Dazhao shows in this play, see Chen 2016b, 85–86.

47 Wang Zunxi 1993, 42.

Party here. Throughout the play we see him involved in working with students or discussions with other intellectuals of his time. In sharp contrast to the 1979 biography, these episodes are often presented without providing a clear judgment of right and wrong or an ultimate truth. Differences and disagreements are openly presented to the audience. This also goes, for example, for the famous debate about problems and “isms” between Hu Shi and the early Marxists:

- HU SHI I am not interested in “isms,” there are still many problems I want to study. Come outside.
- CHEN DUXIU Come inside!
- HU SHI Let’s talk at the door then. My dear Zhongfu, for this issue of *New Youth* I will take a leave.
- CHEN DUXIU Why are you taking a leave?
- HU SHI The last meetings have almost become meetings for discussing national things and politics. I still have many problems I want to study; I am not made for this kind of meeting. (turns around and moves to leave)
- CHEN DUXIU Come back!
- HU SHI I’m not coming back.
- ZHANG GUOTAO Don’t waste your time with him, Prof. Chen.
- HU SHI (turns angrily around) And who are you?
- ZHANG GUOTAO Zhang Guotao. Have you not heard about me, Mr. Hu Shi?
- HU SHI Oh, you are Zhang Guotao.
- ZHANG GUOTAO (emphatically) Well, I would like to learn which problems Mr. Hu Shi can solve with his much-admired Dewey-ism.
- HU SHI Look, Ibsen said: “Sometimes I have the feeling that the whole world is like a capsized boat, the most important thing is that you save yourself.” He also said: “If you want to be useful for society, the best method is that you work on yourself.” The most important thing is ...
- ZHANG GUOTAO Are you familiar with communism? Have you read the “Communist Manifesto”?
- HU SHI You cannot save the country with battle cries, and even though battle cries might be part of the movement for saving the country, you should not forget that your profession is ten times more important than battle cries. Because through your profession you can become a capable person.<sup>48</sup>

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48 Yao Yuan 1993a, 10.

Unlike the 1979 biography, but similar to Wang Chaozhu's book, Yao Yuan's play emphasizes the private dimension of Li Dazhao's life. More than one episode shows him in his family environment, especially in a romantic and happy relationship with his wife, Zhao Renlan. In addition to seeing what an excellent husband he is, we also see him as a father. Moreover, the relationships with other characters on stage are also displayed in an intimate and emotional way, such as that with Zhang Shichao, an intellectual who does not sympathize with the communists at all, or that with Bai Jianwu, the advisor of the warlord Wu Peifu, who was responsible for the February 1923 massacre. Yao Yuan emphasizes the long friendship between Li Dazhao and Bai Jianwu, which leads him to trust in Wu Peifu. This personal and human, not godlike, representation of political characters developed during the 1980s as a strong contrast to earlier depictions.<sup>49</sup> In the case of this play, on the one hand, this leads to a much more approachable main character. However, on the other hand, it is exactly this human dimension, which also seems to show how unsuccessful, tragically unsuccessful, some enterprises of this great communist leader were.

The depiction of the February 1923 and March 18, 1926 massacres merit special attention. First, the February 1923 massacre occupies six or even seven of the twenty-two scenes in the play, if we also count the first appearance of Bai Jianwu in scene 2. Thus, it takes up the most space of any event narrated in the story. This represents an important difference from Wang Chazhu's book too. Second, the play sketches a number of different perspectives, showing the complexity of this event and its connections to Li Dazhao's life. At the beginning we see Li Dazhao being convinced by Bai Jianwu to begin a collaboration with Wu Peifu. At the same time we have the perspective of Zhao Erkang, a young communist and former student of Li Dazhao, who heads to Luoyang to organize the workers. After that we see Bai Jianwu in dialogue with Wu Peifu, discussing how to solve the situation – in other words, this represents the perspective of the politicians. Since Li Dazhao knows that Wu Peifu will not be continuing their collaboration, and will instead put down the striking workers, he heads to Luoyang and engages in a final talk with Bai Jianwu. The next scene briefly mentions that Zhao Erkang has been killed. However, the tragedy is not over for the audience, which knows that Zhao Erkang's wife, a former student of Beijing University, is living in Li Dazhao's home and expecting a baby. Thus the events surrounding the February 1923 massacre are depicted as a tragedy on all possible levels: Li Dazhao has trusted a friend, who sold him out for political reasons; he loses a student and follower who was about to be the father of a new baby while living in his home; at the same time, he loses a number of comrades in the Communist Party, and this all because of a failed project he had designed and supported.

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49 In an essay Sha Yexin remembers how his 1983 play *The Secret History of Karl Marx* was criticized because he depicted Marx “just as a human,” as an “excellent husband, father and friend” and not as a “revolutionary teacher.” See Sha Yexin 2018, 76–77.

A similar atmosphere is created in scene 20: Li Dazhao enters the stage with a bandage around his head. It is apparent that he has been wounded in the March 18th demonstration against the Duan Qirui government, as mentioned by the narrator's voice. What is not mentioned is that these took place in front of the Tiananmen Gate. What follows is the advice of friends to leave Beijing. Despite the cold and quasi-epic way of telling the story, we cannot help being moved by the tragedy of these events: Li Dazhao has started as an intellectual with high ambitions because he wanted to change something for the good of the people. However, in the fight against cruel, powerful people, he has no chance at all. "In Tragedy, there are no festive occasions," Hayden White writes, "except false or illusory ones; rather, there are intimations of states of division among men more terrible than that which incited the tragic agon at the beginning of the drama."<sup>50</sup> If we imagine these scenes being staged in 1991, only two years after the protests and the violent crackdown on the protesters in Tiananmen Square, we cannot help thinking that maybe this tragedy of an intellectual was, to a certain extent, also a reflection of current and recent events.

For the final scene – that of Li Dazhao's death – all the registers used to tell the story are combined once more. A long and emotional talk with Li Dazhao's wife is followed by a short talk with Bai Yuting, Zhang Zuolin's consultant, in which Li Dazhao firmly declares that he has nothing to regret. His last speech, however, does not appear to be related to politics, or even communism or Marxism. Instead, the Li Dazhao on stage recites a poem about a little sheep, which the historical Li Dazhao wrote during a stay in the mountains in 1919. In contrast to the hopeless defeats in the scenes of the play, it provides a final image of peaceful tranquility:

At an old temple's door  
 far away I hear the voice of a lamb.  
 Look! How black sheep mingle with white sheep on the mountain range  
 they climb the mountain one by one.  
 Sheep! What I hear in your voice  
 is delicate kindness, shivering sadness  
 you have never hurt anybody  
 you have never harmed your companions  
 day after day you spend with mountains and water  
 eating leaves and grass  
 Only you are afraid of men, but no man is afraid of you.  
 I don't fear you but I love you  
 I don't fear you but I love you, that is your victory.<sup>51</sup>

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50 White 1973, 9.

51 Yao Yuan 1993a, 24. See also Li Dazhao 1999, vol. III, 315.

After Li Dazhao's recital the intellectuals Hu Shi, Cai Yuanpei, Zhang Shizhao, and Chen Duxiu appear to bid him farewell. Mao Zedong concludes the play by again emphasizing Li Dazhao's contribution to the development of Marxism and communism in China. Hayden White also appears to have provided a suitable description for this ending: "Still, the fall of the protagonist and the shaking of the world he inhabits which occur at the end of the Tragic play are not regarded as totally threatening to those who survive the agonistic test."<sup>52</sup>

### In Search of Li Dazhao (2011): A Satire

In contrast to the dramaturgies discussed above, *In Search of Li Dazhao* begins with Li Dazhao's death. Li Dazhao is dragged to the gallows with the same serene expression on his face that is so often mentioned in the literature. When he is asked if there is something he would like to say, he simply shakes his head, and when the executioner tries to put the rope over his head, he just says, "I can do it by myself." A voice announces, "Immediate execution!" The iron plate under his feet is kicked away, a great trembling sound shakes the stage and everything plunges into darkness. After a while, a female voice starts singing, "There is a place called Tangshan, in the Hebei Province in China," giving the impression that now, after the death of Li Dazhao, the play is about to start again from Li Dazhao's birth in Leting Tangshan in Hebei. However, at this moment, the director comes onstage, the actor playing Li Dazhao steps out of his role and sits down on the gallows and the female singer asks in her normal voice, "What's up, director?" The director wants to know why the female revolutionary martyr was missing in the group of those condemned to death. In a relaxed and gently humorous atmosphere – a sharp contrast to the tragic pathos of the play's first moments – the director and audience learn that the actress playing the female revolutionary martyr did not show up because she was unhappy with such a small role. In fact, she has higher ambitions and has already acted in a TV series.<sup>53</sup> Of course, at this moment, we are no longer in the year 1927 but in 2011.

Right from this prologue, Meng Bing shows that it is not his intention to recount the life of Li Dazhao just by focusing on it in its historical context; instead, he will tell it explicitly in the context of the China of the present day. Dramaturgically speaking, then, the story of Li Dazhao is a *mise en abyme*, a play within a play: what we see on stage is a group of actors and a director of a contemporary Chinese drama troupe working on a rehearsal for a play about Li Dazhao. Within the process of putting the play on stage, inspired by a Stanislavskian approach to performance, they try to discover feeling and understanding

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52 White 1975, 9.

53 My analysis is based on the dramatic text published in a collection of Meng Bing plays. Meng Bing 2011, vol. III, 238–239. For an analysis also of the performance, see Chen 2016a, 89–92.

for the characters. What we see is their work, their problems, their doubts – in short, the conflict between the life of the present and the life of the past.

The inner play, Li Dazhao's life, is in many aspects recounted as the glorious biography of a great man: beside him, Chen Duxiu, Mao Zedong, Sun Yat-sen, Song Qingling, Hu Shi, and even Lenin take the stage. Similarly, he participates in a number of historical events, such as the May Fourth Movement, the foundation of communist student groups, and the meetings with Sun Yat-sen to organize the First United Front. However, some hitherto unknown details provide new perspectives and raise questions about this life: in the beginning it is Li Dazhao and his grandfather who recount the story of Li's early youth, mixing the first- and second-person singular. At one point Li Dazhao says, "My grandfather told me, when I was a child, I fell asleep while sucking his nipples."<sup>54</sup> In another episode Li leaves for Luoyang to talk to Wu Peifu. In that moment we hear the voice of his young daughter, who is very sick (and actually died during this period) asking her father to come back to her. Thus in addition to the tragic result of this project, as we have already discussed, we even come to know that there is another, more private tragedy connected with it. What should one think about a father who has left his dying child alone for the sake of an enterprise that eventually only leads to disaster and more deaths?

Li Dazhao's last words in this play describe his ideals of Marxism and communism, but in a very broad sense. This does not occur in a political statement uttered with conviction but in a private talk with his beloved wife. In other words, what was, in the 1979 literary biography, a political farewell, delivered with his head raised high, here becomes an emotional declaration of love for his wife:

LI DAZHAO: If you can really wait until that day, then you won't be able to stop laughing, my dear Lan. I have not laughed in this life. All my efforts, all my pursuits – from the viewpoint of this present day they have failed. However, I have nothing to regret. Because I used my limited life to find a way that can lead China toward an ideal world. This is Marxism, this is Communism. On the day that my ideals become real, you must take our children and laugh! (Li stands up, Zhao and the children stand up, look towards Li) You must go back to our hometown and laugh on the Wufeng Mountain, laugh at the ocean. Between the mountain and the sea your laughter will break through clouds and haze, sky and earth will be filled with its echo! (Zhao and the children walk forward, towards 8 o'clock position, sit on the platform) In that time, wherever I am, I will hear you laughing. If I am in Paradise, your laughter will rise straight through the clouds. If I am in Hell, your laughter will shake the palace of the underworld! ... (walks back to the gallows) In that time, when the night is deep and the people quiet, then you will hear me whispering in your ear: "My dear Lan, thank you for everything ..."<sup>55</sup>

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54 Meng Bing 2011, vol. III, 241.

55 Meng Bing 2011, vol. III, 285.

While the Li Dazhao inner play ultimately shows a tendency toward positive and conciliatory moments, the outer play uses the plain, blunt language of contemporary China to repeatedly interrupt these moments. It tells the story of a dilemma facing the young actors of today when they are called upon to play the roles of communists from the 1920s. This plot plays out entirely in the present, that is, the early 2010s. Its central protagonist was born as recently as the 1990s: this is a young actor who tries to “enter” into the role of Li Dazhao. At the beginning he struggles and cannot find any way into this character; slowly, however, he becomes closer to him; in the end, he appears to be changed by the experience. The character who assists him is the play’s director, who tries to explain the historical circumstances and help the young actors, as well as the audience, to gain a better understanding of the times Li Dazhao lived in. However, his advice often results in extremely humorous situations. For example, at one point, in the course of a discussion of the May Fourth Movement, a young actor asks naively if it would not perhaps have been better after all if Eastern Shandong had become a Japanese colony – because then maybe that part of China, at least, would be as rich as Japan is today. Another comic scene arises when the actors are required to sing “The Internationale” as part of the scene recounting the foundation of the first communist group at Beijing University in 1920. Since the actors, born in the 1990s, do not know the words of the song well enough to perform it effectively, the exasperated director hangs the song text on the walls of the rehearsal hall and instructs them to sing it three times every day before starting rehearsals. These comic scenes provide strong contrasts to the seriousness of the Li Dazhao story.

While the dramaturgical juxtaposition of the two plots leads to many entertaining moments, it also makes it possible to express reflections and doubts on many aspects not only concerning historical evaluations that are taken for granted, as in the abovementioned case of the May Fourth Movement, but also concerning the history of Marxism, communism, and revolution. In a long monologue around the midpoint of the play, the young actor assigned the central role reveals his problems with the character he is supposed to play:

LI DAZHAO ACTOR (sighing): ... When they told me to play Li Dazhao, I agreed only reluctantly. After having played the leading male character in two TV series (the Li Dazhao theme 2 resounds), I am not used to the stage anymore, I cannot concentrate well. In addition, I do not understand people like Li Dazhao, so this is all very hard for me. The communists of those times were too naive. Indeed, they did not think about themselves at all and it seems to me that they did not even care about their own lives. They just sacrificed everything so easily (the woman gets up and walks to the track in front), so I am wondering: why did they do this? Because of their ideals? Because of their faith? What would they have thought if they had known that today, many years later, somebody who speaks about ideals and faith is considered a fake person? (the music gets quieter) Just take a look at the people of today, how they spend their days busy with apartments, cars, money, their children, and girls ... they just live for drinking and playing cards, leading an unconscious life in dreams and drunkenness. Selfish and arrogant, they cheat on their mothers, cheat on their

wives ... If, more than eighty years ago, Li Dazhao had known that this is what they were giving their lives for, would he still have walked so steadily towards the gallows? Would he still have walked toward death without turning around?<sup>56</sup>

At the end of the play, the conflict seems to be resolved: the actor playing Li Dazhao realizes that he can also draw inspiration from the early communist leader's life for a role he has been asked to play in an anti-corruption TV series, yet a third plot unfolding in the play. In light of the title of the play, we could argue that, in this way, the young actor searches for and finds Li Dazhao in the world of the present day. However, as can be seen from a number of Chinese articles published on the play, it is the clash between the two plots that lives longest in the memory of audiences.<sup>57</sup> The basic dramaturgical arrangement of Li Dazhao's life, with all its connections to politics and CCP history, as a story that is repeatedly interrupted, questioned, and challenged by the voices of imaginary innocent or ignorant characters, makes it possible that the ideas and values within this history, since they are repeated and challenged again and again, can be scrutinized.

In returning to Hayden White we come across the notion of a "drama of diremption," or in other words, a theatre of separation and disjunction. This, according to White, is typical of satire.<sup>58</sup> If the 1979 *Biography of Li Dazhao* aimed at bringing together and uniting all different aspects in a harmonious story, *In Search of Li Dazhao* tears apart elements that seemed intimately connected and shows that this connection is able to be questioned. In addition, White's more detailed description of satire appears to be absolutely in line with the dramaturgical choices of Meng Bing's play of 2011: "But Satire represents a different kind of qualification of the hopes, possibilities, and truths of human existence revealed in Romance, Comedy, and Tragedy respectively. It views these hopes, possibilities, and truths Ironically, in the atmosphere generated by the apprehension of the ultimate inadequacy of consciousness to live in the world happily or to comprehend it fully."<sup>59</sup>

### *Mister Dazhao* (2018): A Comedy

Belonging to the musical genre, Tuo Lu's *Mister Dazhao* provides yet another contrast with the texts studied so far. The implication is that many parts of the play are not spoken but sung, and that the rigorous selection of events from a life, which highlighted early as typical of biographical drama, may be even more severer than it was in the previous texts. Unlike the previous two plays, this work focuses on just a single day – April 28, 1927, the

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56 Meng Bing 2011, vol III, 262–263.

57 Ouyang Yibing 2011.

58 White 1973, 9.

59 White 1973, 10.



day Li Dazhao died.<sup>60</sup> It might not be surprising, then, that a recurrent motif is dying and death, which is explored from many different angles and perspectives. However, this does not mean that *Mister Dazhao* simply tells a sad story; on the contrary, starting with death it explores the topics of youth and human life in general.

While the other dramas summarize ten or even more than thirty years of Li Dazhao's life, *Mister Dazhao* focuses on the day of his death and develops it into the four following parts: the prologue, "at daybreak"; the first act, "on the execution ground"; the second act, "the trial"; and the third act, "the execution." Whereas the other two plays present many events from across Li Dazhao's life and indeed Chinese history, *Mister Dazhao* largely explores new contexts: the opening scene, seemingly inspired by Lu Xun's short stories, feature the common folk awaiting the spectacle of a public execution (mirroring the opening of Lu Xun's "True Story of Ah Q"). A night watchman announces the time, and a juggler and a blind man stand near the gallows. A seller of "oil tea" (*youcha*) is even shown to have prepared a bun that he wishes to transform into a "blood bun" (*xue mantou*) to cater to the popular superstition that blood has healing properties (reflecting Lu Xun's famous story, "Medicine"<sup>61</sup>). Thus the musical begins to establish, more than with historical or biographical accounts, a connection between the life of Li Dazhao and some well-known figures and images of modern Chinese literature.

The basic storyline can be traced back to a series of historical events that have hitherto not been represented on stage. Since a character called the General, who does not appear on stage himself, is still not sure what to do with Li Dazhao and the other convicts, he has sent six letters to other military leaders to ask for their advice. While awaiting the answers, the trial unfolds on stage. While the officer carries out the interrogation, several people connected to Li Dazhao appear: first, his wife, Zhao Renlan, with their children; then Wu Keming, a workers' representative, along with some of the workers; and finally, the director of Beijing University and several students. Although this dramaturgy is based on historical fact – Zhang Zuolin did indeed send letters to Chiang Kai-shek and others to obtain their advice<sup>62</sup> – the scenes played out on stage while awaiting the answers to these letters have only a loose connection with real historical events.

At the play's ending older motifs are combined with the new story: while listening to the talks between Li Dazhao, the officer, and other characters, the common folk – who had originally just come to watch the execution – begin to change their minds. Ultimately, all the characters on stage join in and sing "The Internationale." The play is concluded with the following subtitles which are somehow a collage of frequent descriptions and images:

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60 My analysis is based on the published dramatic text. See Zhou and Tuo 2018.

61 Lu Xun 1980, vol. I, 58–67, 102–154.

62 Zou Chuan 2015, 341.

The military court announces that twenty communists are sentenced to death, the sentence is to be carried out immediately. Li Dazhao steps toward the gallows. With a calm and tranquil expression on his face he walks towards death. Mister Li Dazhao upheld morality and justice with iron shoulders, he gave his blood for changing history.<sup>63</sup>

Although the death of the main character takes place, as is suggested from the beginning of the play, the atmosphere at the end is not that of hopelessness; on the contrary, it celebrates feelings of change and union. In other words, “the condition of society is represented as being purer, saner, and healthier as a result of the conflict among seemingly inalterably opposed elements in the world; these elements are revealed to be, in the long run, harmonizable with one another, unified, at one with themselves and the others.”<sup>64</sup> According to Hayden White, this is a typical aspect of comedy.

While the concluding subtitles mentioned above echo former representations, the Li Dazhao character himself appears very differently here, fundamentally as a poetic character: when he comes onstage for the first time, he performs a song inspired by Li Dazhao’s long pre-Marxist poem, *Spring*, published in 1916: “East winds melt frost. Spring days bring sun, thousands of willows, in budding greenness.”<sup>65</sup> However, this bright image of spring is blended into the dark atmosphere of death: “But next to the Chang’an Street, in that small lane in the western part of the city, it’s a hell on earth, where not even one beam of sunlight can reach.”<sup>66</sup>

The leitmotif-like song, which is repeated by a chorus at different moments in the musical, is dedicated to the main character and comes to Li Dazhao through a series of images and symbols. These appear to be almost disconnected from any concrete time and space, emphasizing ideas of newness and change:

You are a woodsman, from daybreak to dusk you are swinging the axe  
 You are the thief of fire, from daybreak to dusk you are walking on mountainous roads  
 The axe on your shoulder, you are taking mountain after mountain; the fire in your  
 hand, you are passing from valley to valley.  
 You are a night watchman, from the first watch to the fifth, who sends off the darkness  
 and welcomes the light.  
 You are a gravedigger, from the west to the east, who gets rid of the old and brings the  
 brand new.  
 You are a lightning bolt, dividing the clouds, standing in front of heaven and earth, ven-  
 erated by generation after generation,

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63 Zhou and Tuo 2018, 206.

64 White 1973, 9.

65 Zhou and Tuo 2018. This translation is based on Claudia Pozzana’s translation. See Pozzana 2002, 291.

66 Zhou and Tuo 2018, 193.

We are all hardworking people, linked together by destiny, together in fight, together in sacrifice,  
We hear the people's call to action, and at the end the horn of victory.<sup>67</sup>

As the director reveals, the image of the woodsman was inspired by Li Dazhao's poem, "Rain in the Mountains," which was published in 1919, in the same year as *Spring*.<sup>68</sup> Like the poem about the little sheep, "Rain in the Mountains" does not seem to convey an overt political message. Instead, if we think about the images of woodsmen and shepherds in traditional Chinese poetry, we may relate them to a way of life far removed from the noise of the city and politics. Read in this light, the image of Li Dazhao here appears to be strikingly opposite to that of the former revolutionary. The "thief of fire," on the other hand, refers to Prometheus, a character from Greek mythology, who has been repeatedly used to describe the work and contribution of Li Dazhao, which was to bring the fire of Marxism to China (as Prometheus brought fire to the humans). The night watchman who brings the morning, the gravedigger who brings new life, and the lightning bolt that illuminates the darkness are images that can all be traced back to Li Dazhao's texts. However, when presented in *Mister Dazhao*, more than making unique references, they seem to be being used as poetic images open to different interpretations.

Via devices like the leitmotif-song, the repeated reading of the letters, and the visits by different people from Li Dazhao's life, rather than a story with direction and development, *Mister Dazhao* proves to be a work that observes a kind of cyclical dramaturgy, determined by variations and repetitions. Furthermore, whereas the previous dramas had proceeded with many fast-changing scenes and settings, producing an effect of activity and change, *Mister Dazhao* presents the same space from the beginning to the end and contains many pauses and contemplative passages. Whereas the biographies previously discussed present a number of different topics, *Mister Dazhao* revolves around one central topic, namely, death. This is approached from many different angles, not least from a humorous one, as exemplified in the "song of the gallows," in which this instrument of death recounts its own life and history:

I am the gallows, the gallows, that's me,  
In the fifth century I was born in the land where the sun never sets  
People say that I am a symbol of death  
I look like a door, with a rope on its frame  
When you walk through it, you say goodbye to the world,  
No matter if you are a queen, or a minister, or a revolutionary.<sup>69</sup>

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67 Zhou and Tuo 2018, 193.

68 Li Dazhao 1999, vol. III, 317.

69 Zhou and Tuo 2018, 198–199.

In the context of the whole play, such passages locate Li Dazhao's life not just within a Chinese dimension of past and present, as all the previously discussed biographies do; it is also situated within a more universal context of the human condition and of human history.

This tendency can also be observed at the level of episodes and characters: whereas in all the other three texts, Li Dazhao's life is more or less set in the concrete historical environment of the May Fourth Movement, the founding of the Communist Party, and early communist activity in the 1920s, *Mister Dazhao* only hints at some of these events and does not feature any of them explicitly. Likewise, the other biographies present a number of well-known historical figures, such as Chen Duxiu, Hu Shi, and Mao Zedong; with the exception of Li Dazhao himself, *Mister Dazhao* does not feature any other famous personalities from history. The effect of these choices is that Li Dazhao's story appears as a more universal story of love, death, and poetry. In addition, it appears as a lighter story that, to some extent, has broken free of the heavy burden of history.

This "lightness" not only relates to characters and events, but also to the handling of those texts of Li Dazhao's that were showcased throughout the twentieth century as his, and China's, first Marxist writings. To explain this point let us focus on Li Dazhao's final speech in the musical:

Such historical remnants as emperors, aristocrats, warlords, militarism, and capitalism will be crushed by this worldwide mass movement. In light of this invincible current they will fall one by one to the ground, swept away like yellow leaves in the icy autumn wind. But, when tomorrow's morning bell rings, the dawn of freedom will arrive, and the bright future will wave its hand towards us. The dawn of freedom will arrive and will let its light shine on our people.<sup>70</sup>

What is here Li Dazhao's last words on stage is actually a modified quotation from "The Victory of Bolshevism," published in October 1918. However, we should note that the explicit reference to Bolshevism (in Latin letters in the Chinese text) was skipped in *Mister Dazhao*, along with the famous sentence, quoted innumerable times in previous texts –

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70 Zhou and Tuo 2018. I have adapted the English translation of "The Victory of Bolshevism" by Frank Ruda and Claudia Pozzana, which reads: "Such historical remnants as emperors, aristocrats, warlords, militarism and capitalism that can hinder the progress of the new movement will be crushed by this worldwide mass movement with the force of an avalanche and the power of a lightning bolt. In light of this invincible current they will fall one by one to the ground, swept away like yellow leaves in the icy autumn wind. From now on one will see the victory banner of Bolshevism and hear the victory hymn of Bolshevism everywhere. The tocsin of humanity has tolled. The dawn of freedom has set in! The world of the future will be a world of the red flag!" Li Dazhao 2017, 247. In *Mister Dazhao* some passages are skipped.

for instance, at the end of the *Biography of Li Dazhao* – “The earth of the future will be a world of the red flag!”<sup>71</sup> Both could be seen as well-known elements and images intimately connected to Marxism and communism; therefore, we could wonder, why are they erased from a twenty-first-century musical theatre play about Li Dazhao? Is it because the young audience the musical is addressing may not be familiar with a term like Bolshevism? Or that the prophecy of a future communist world appears a bit absurd in the capitalist present? Or perhaps because it makes the first Marxist more attractive to contemporary China if he is not *too* Marxist? Many further questions could be asked, which merit study elsewhere. To conclude this section, it may be worth observing that other theatrical productions about Li Dazhao point in a similar direction: in 2018, the same year *Mister Dazhao* was first performed, an operatic version of Yao Yuan’s 1991 play was staged by the Shanghai Opera House. Instead of *Li Dazhao*, it is more poetically named *The Morning Bell* – quoting the title of a journal Li Dazhao worked for before becoming a Marxist, as well as his famous text, “The Mission of the Morning Bell” from 1916.<sup>72</sup> (Interestingly, in the modified quotation from “The Victory of Bolshevism” in the musical *Mister Dazhao*, the “tocsin of humanity” has been transformed into “tomorrow’s morning bell”). While most of the love and family scenes from the 1991 drama have been kept in the opera script, several scenes featuring historical personalities, and above all, the character of Mao Zedong, have been excluded. The events surrounding the February 1923 massacre are presented in a greatly reduced way, and at the end, the chorus provides a solemn conclusion that does not feature any concrete reference to Chinese communism or Marxism.<sup>73</sup> It might well be asked, to what extent these tendencies are related to the operatic or musical form, which are experiencing a new boom in contemporary China.

## Conclusions

Li Dazhao is celebrated in official narratives of contemporary China as the first promoter of Marxism and communism. His life unfolded amid the beginnings of Chinese Marxism and the Communist Party, which has been writing its history as a narrative of continuous evolution and success for almost 100 years. In addition to this romantic narrative, new dramaturgies have appeared on the Chinese theatre stage in recent years, which I, evoking Hayden White, have described as tragic, satirical, and comic in this paper. These characterizations are largely determined by the way in which each production makes selections

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71 See the Chinese original in Li Dazhao 1999, vol. III, 110; Li Dazhao 2017, 247. See also footnote 39.

72 Li Dazhao, 1999, vol. II, 364–369.

73 Yao Yuan 2018.

and omissions of biographical and historical materials, especially regarding the characters, events, and works chosen from Li Dazhao's life and how they are arranged into a play.

Yao Yuan's 1991 *Li Dazhao* chooses moments from public and private life, and in addition to well-known historical personalities, it features Li Dazhao's wife and daughter. The first part shows Li Dazhao as an intellectual among intellectuals, while the second focuses on the intellectual engaged in political activities, all of which lead to a tragic end. In terms of structure, the scenes are arranged in a loose connection and thus open up many areas for reflection. Meng Bing's 2011 *In Search of Li Dazhao* juxtaposes a Li Dazhao inner plot that is to some extent conventional with an outer plot about the daily lives and problems of young people born in the 1990s. This dramaturgy makes it possible that the historical events and values Li Dazhao is connected with appear as something that is continuously questioned and dismantled. The musical production *Mister Dazhao* chooses to relate Li Dazhao's life without any clear reference to historical events; likewise, it does not feature any famous historical personalities. A number of quotations from pre-Marxist and Marxist works are blended into the dialogues and songs in a poetic way, but some famous references have been skipped. The result is a more conciliatory text that, more than anything else, celebrates universal human values.

At the end of his book on "China's first Marxist," Maurice Meisner discusses the hypothetical question of what Li Dazhao would have thought about the communist victory and foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949.<sup>74</sup> If we pose an analogous question – what would Li Dazhao have thought about the many different dramaturgies depicting his life in contemporary China? – we might, to our surprise, find an answer in his own writing, "Essentials for the study of history" (Shixue yao lun), which features in his *Collected Works*, was, interestingly, not much considered in the older approaches to Li Dazhao; however, in recent years, it has become one of his most discussed and often reprinted works:

The people who lived in the Han and Tang dynasties had their ideas about Confucius. The people in the Song and Ming dynasties had other ideas. The ideas of modern people were different again from those of the Song and Ming people. My own ideas about Confucius of ten years ago were very different from my ideas of today. Therefore, we cannot say that a biography of Confucius, Jesus, Buddha, or Mohammed should not be rewritten. There is no perfect history for any historical fact. Therefore, there is no historical fact which does not need to be continuously rewritten.<sup>75</sup>

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74 Meisner 1967, 266.

75 Li Dazhao 1999, vol. IV, 360–161.

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