

The Appropriation of Daoist and Marxist Concepts of Dialectics in Brecht's Theatre

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Abstract This paper centers around the question: What does the term “dialectic” mean to Brecht in the constant flux of his ideas and opinions? I argue for the connection between Daoism and Brecht’s specific version of dialectics in his theatre. While my aim is not to claim that Brecht depends on Chinese thought to formulate his theoretical statements about theatre, I attempt to demonstrate that certain Daoist ideas were central to Brecht’s very concept of contradiction. Furthermore, I suggest that Brecht’s notion of “dialectic” acquires a full meaning and function in Brecht’s combination, appropriation, interpretation and use of the Daoist and Marxist concepts of dialectics from his own perspective.

Key Words Brecht; dialectics; Daoism; Marxism; Korsch

There is little doubt amongst critics and commentators concerning the general fact of Brecht’s debt to Marxist dialectics or his intention to apply it to the theatre. Yet it would be a mistake to identify Brecht’s notion of dialectics with Marxist dialectics—although it is very common for Brecht critics to do so. Three facts need to be clarified prior to our discussion of Brecht’s dialectic theatre. First, Brecht’s notion of epic theatre evolved in opposition to “naturalism,” but it is also, as Willett suggest, “designed for the existing bourgeois ‘apparatus’ and audience” (*Brecht in Context* 223). Second, Brecht’s aesthetics of theatre, as is consistent with his belief in change, is an ever changing one; such is the case in his uses of the terms “epic,” “non-aristotelian,” and “dialectic” to define his theatre. Third, Brecht’s aesthetic theory and practice were influenced by Korsch’s understanding of Marxism. This paper centers around the question: What does the term “dialectic” mean to Brecht in the constant flux of his ideas and opinions? I argue for the connection between Daoism and Brecht’s specific version of dialectics in his theatre. While my aim is not to claim that Brecht depends on Chinese thought to formulate his theoretical statements about theatre, I attempt to demonstrate that certain Daoist ideas were central to Brecht’s

very concept of contradiction. Furthermore, I suggest that Brecht's notion of "dialectic" acquires a full meaning and function in Brecht's combination, appropriation, interpretation and use of the Daoist and Marxist concepts of dialectics from his own perspective.

The paper begins by investigating Brecht's keen interest in Lao Zi's dialectics, which is followed by a full consideration of the transition of Brecht's theoretical development from "epic theatre" to "dialectical theatre" with a focus on his theoretical essays. To question the nature of the particular form of dialectics he is designating in his "dialectical theatre," I shall indicate how Marxist ideas (together with Korsch's version of Marxist dialectical materialism) and Lao Zi's dialectics help formulate the very form of his theatre and writing.

1. Brecht and Lao Zi's Dialectics

The position of Daoism in Brecht's work is a debatable subject among Brecht critics. Berg-Pan emphasizes the complementary function of the Daoist ideas in Brecht's plays: in his words, Chinese philosophy "fill[s] gaps which Marx and Engels have left in their social philosophy" and these gaps include "matters relating to human psychology, to practical questions about how to earn a living, what to do when in love, how to avoid dangers, and other mundane matters which had escaped the attention of Marx and Engels" ("Mixing Old and New Wisdom" 206). The implication of Berg-Pan's claim is that messages—such as "the least useful is the most fortunate"—from Daoism are simply examples of old Chinese wisdom which have no intersection with Marxism. Esslin, taking an opposing view, completely rejects the importance of the teaching of Daoism to Brecht's Marxism:

This Taoist attitude of yielding to the flow of things, while recognizing its absurdity, coexisted in Brecht's mind with, and below, the doctrine of the class struggle and the gospel of the violent transformation of the world. This in fact is the passive attitude, the yielding to emotion, the abandonment of reason he so feared in his youth, transformed into a mellow and profound philosophy. (243)

Esslin thinks that Brecht simply seeks a reconciliation between his demand for radical social change and "a yearning for the quiet, passive acceptance of the world" (243), a sentiment shared by Brecht and Lao Zi. By setting Marxism and Daoism in opposition, Esslin argues for the complexity of Brecht's works in the sense that Daoism offsets Brecht's radical demand for violent change.

Other critics argue for an analogy between the Marxist dialectic and the Daoist dialectic (which Tatlow considers to be "a peasant dialectic"). Indeed, Brecht's

interest in Daoism and Marxism is perhaps not surprising, considering the fact that Mao Zedong is often known as integrating Marxism with Daoism in his war strategy.¹ Underneath their obvious divergences—in Marxism, the dialectical method of observation is integrated with the historical materialistic view of history, whereas in Daoism, man's place in nature (and society) is aligned with the movement of *tao* (the natural process) in order to reach the harmony and balance of life—Marxism and Daoism do share a similar understanding of the dynamic interplay of opposites (taken out of their distinct historical, social, and philosophical contexts). Yet we should also note Brecht's interpretation and employment of Daoist thought in his specific work do appear to create a tension between his views and traditional Marxist principles.

Before Brecht began his serious study of Marxism, he already realized internal contradictions within the human subject:

Even when a character behaves by contradictions that's only because nobody can be identically the same at two unidentical moments. Changes in his exterior continually lead to an inner reshuffling. The continuity of the ego is a myth. A man is an atom that perpetually breaks up and forms anew. We have to show things as they are.²

This passage, according to Willett's editorial note, was taken from an interview originally published in *Die Literarische Welt*, 30 July 1926. Here Brecht mentioned specifically how the form of men's lives should be approached in light of this constant process of change and internal contradiction. We find a similar view in "A Short Organum for the Theatre [Short Organum]," when Brecht points out the connection between the V-effect and Marx's method of dialectical materialism.

This technique allows the theatre to make use in its representations of the new social scientific method known as dialectical materialism. In order to unearth society's laws of motion this method treats social situations as processes, and traces out all their inconsistencies. It regards nothing as existing except in so far as it changes, in other words is in disharmony with itself. This also goes for those human feelings, opinions and attitudes through which at any time the form of men's life together finds its expression. (BT 193)

Here the concept of dialectics means no more than to contradict from within, a view that is closer to his earlier belief than a clear elaboration in Hegel's sense (which Marx and Engels inherited).

As early as 1920 Brecht had begun to read Lao Zi's *Tao Te Ching* and recognized

an analogy between his ideas and those of Lao Zi, as he writes in his diaries: "But he [Frank Warschauer] introduced me to Lao Tzu, who agrees with me about so many things that he keeps on being astonished...For Warschauer: Baden & Lao Tzu" (*Diaries* 50). What are the "so many things" that Brecht and Lao Zi agreed upon? Berg-Pan argues that Lao Zi's philosophy is concerned "for the fate of ordinary people and the fact of their exploitation" (*Bertolt Brecht and China* 74). Besides this general sympathy towards the common people, Brecht also used various different Daoist images and thoughts, nearly all of which are about human behavior—i.e. the image of process, the strategy of survival, the concept of goodness, the critique of virtues (*Mask* 455-75). However, it would be difficult to verify Brecht's intention. We may well argue that Brecht's observations of the contradictions inherent in human behavior are intuitive, or that he may get them from the Western intellectual traditions (one only needs to mention the name of Nietzsche and Heraclitus). Yet it is not my purpose to argue from which cultural traditions Brecht draws more influence. Rather, it is the collision and conflation between Western and Chinese thought that make the comparison interesting to this investigation.

According to Brecht's perspective, everything is in perpetual flux; or, as Benjamin summarizes Brecht's understanding of history, "It can happen this way, but it can also happen in a different way" (8). It is for this reason that water imagery is so important in Brecht's work, since it indicates that the world and human consciousness accordingly is in a constant process of change. In *Man Equals Man*, when Galy Gay for the first time denies himself, Widow Begbick states in her song of mutability that

Often as you may see the river sluggishly flowing
 Each time the water is different.
 What's gone can't go past again. Not one drop
 Ever flows back to its starting point. (CP 2: 23)

She suggests that the philosophical teaching that one should never attempt to

...hold on to the wave
 That's breaking against your foot: so long as
 You stand in the stream fresh waves
 Will always keep breaking against it. (CP 2: 39)

Ewen proposes that Begbick is voicing the sentiments of an ancient Greek Philosopher, Heraclitus of Ephesus, when he said: "You cannot step twice into the same rivers, for fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you" (137). We find, however,

similar views expressed in chapter 8 of the *Tao Te Ching*:

The highest Good is like that of water. The goodness of water is that it benefits the ten thousand creatures; yet itself does not scramble, but is content with the places that all men disdain. It is this that makes water so near to the Way. (17)

The implication of the potentiality for change reminds us of the ultimate aim of Brecht's theatre, which "sought not only to interpret the world but to change the world."

The water image means more than perpetual flux; it demonstrates an overarching paradox of Lao Zi's *Tao Te Ching*. We read in chapter 78: "Nothing under heaven is softer or more yielding than water; but when it attacks things hard and resistant there is not one of them that can prevail" (165). In his poem "Legend of the origin of the book *Tao Te Ching* on Lao Tzu's way into Exile," Brecht rephrases Lao Zi's thought in his own words: "The yielding water in motion gets the better in the end of granite and porphyry," a saying which implies the most basic paradox in Daoism: the weaker will conquer the stronger. All these indicate that although Brecht's perception of change and contradiction may not solely come from Daoism, reading Brecht's ideas of dialectics with reference to Daoism and Marxist dialectics provides us with more dimensions for exploring how Brecht's perception of dialectics functions in his understanding of Man. Indeed, comparing the Daoist paradox and Marxist dialectics, we find how Brecht swiftly reworks Daoism into Marxist dialectics in formulating his own ideas.

Lao Zi's notion of paradox derives from the theory of *yin* (the receptive and gentle force), and *yang* (the active one), as indicated in *I-Ching: Book of Change*. In this book, *Yin* and *yang* are configured as two significant concepts: they are two polarities within one entity, but it is also through their interactions that they engender the Ten-thousand Beings. According to Cheng, Lao Zi's concept of paradox is inseparably bound up with the interdependence and correspondence between Beings, since Beings, aside from being autonomous and isolated, are a living network characterized by interchange. Cheng further concludes that "Because of this organicist conception of the universe, in Chinese philosophical thought relation rather than substance is emphasized; truth rises out of an intersubjectivity rather than out of the subject/object distinction" (17).

These two polarities within one entity are reflected in the Chinese notion of contradiction/paradox as *maodun*. The Chinese word makes no distinction between these two Western categories and hence refers to both of them. The Chinese notion of contradiction as *maodun* is composed of the two characters *mao* (spear) and *dun*

(shield), which stands respectively for aggressive and defensive weapons in war. The etymological analysis embodies the mutual dependence of all opposites. Unlike the Marxist dialectic in which oppositions are emphasized, it is the complementary nature that is emphasized in Chinese thought. Furthermore, the opposites in unity embody the interplay of polarities. As Jeaneane D. and Merv Fowler explain: “contrary to most western thought it is not the triumph of good over evil, of light over darkness, of the divine over the demonic that is the Chinese goal, but the perfect balance between *yin* and *yang* polarities that enables the self to transcend them in activity. Evil is but temporary disharmony, just as night is the temporary suspension of day” (52). In other words, without its complementary opposite, nothing can be wholly one polarity. Lao Zi views the opposing concepts of beauty and ugliness, good and evil, full and empty, construction and destruction, subject and object as existing and acquiring their meaning in relation to the other, such that in different circumstances each could be transformed to its opposite.

Brecht has no knowledge of the Chinese language, nor did he live to read Jeaneane D. and Merve Fowler. Yet in Brecht, we see how he too questions the basic definitions of social ethics, making it imperative to reconsider the familiar concepts of human qualities (i.e. virtuousness, weakness, goodness) not as absolute categories, but polarity in unity with their opposites. The individual in Brecht's later works is many faceted—good and bad, brave and cowardly, compassionate and cruel, exemplified in the characters of Mother Courage, Galileo, Shen Teh, and Puntila—despite the fact that the individuals are still products of social circumstances. The clear lines drawn between different social classes are blurred; moreover, there is no close link between one's social behavior and social class. Noticing the significance of the Daoist dialectic in Brecht's work of the late thirties and early forties, Tatlow identifies three related topics: “the critique of virtues, the strategy of survival and the problem of natural process” (“Peasant Dialectics” 281).

2. From Epic Theatre to Dialectical Theatre

Brecht used a theoretical vocabulary to describe his techniques of staging, acting and the intended social function of his work; he referred to his theatre as “epic” (as opposed to “dramatic”) and “non-aristotelian,” and in the last years of his life in Berlin, reckoning the inadequacy of the term “epic,” he decided to substitute “dialectical” for “epic”, a formal demonstration of his evolving method. Brecht wrote in the “Appendices to the Short Organum” that the concept of “epic” was “too light and too vague for the kind of theatre intended” (BT 276) declaring:

An effort is not being made to move from the epic theatre to the dialectical

theatre... 'epic theatre' is too formal a term for the kind of theatre aimed at (and to some extent practised). Epic theatre is a prerequisite for these conditions, but it does not of itself imply that productivity and changeability of society from which they derive their main element of pleasure. (BT 281-2)

Brecht is aware that "epic" is more of a formal category, while he contemplated more than a mere revolution of theatrical form. Willett suggests that Brecht came to the designation of "dialectical theatre" based on the later nine essays grouped as "Dialectics in the Theatre" (1948-55). In response to Willett's observation, Peter Brooker studied the late work of Brecht and came to the conclusion that Brecht was undecided about his description of "dialectical theatre," since, on the one hand, his nine essays failed to present a coherent argument (21), and on the other hand, they were not committed to print in his lifetime (26). In opposition to both views, Carney claimed that Brecht's thought was informed by the dialectics as early as the 1930s (154). While I align myself with Carney's argument, I suggest that it is essential to examine the issue of Brecht's notion of dialectics from the following two aspects. First, we need to investigate what the two terms "epic" and "dialectic" mean in Brecht's context. Second, in order to designate the specific version of Brecht's dialectics, we must refer to Korsch's and Lao Zi's thinking about dialectics, both of which, as we shall see, helped to shape Brecht's formulation of his aesthetic of theatre.

Brecht saw his theatre as for the new age, the "scientific age," in which productivity has been made theatre's "main source of entertainment" and "has been also taken to be its theme" (BT 186). The questions for Brecht arise, how could his theatre unveil the commodifications inherent in bourgeois societies? And how could these issues be addressed not only in dramaturgy but also on the performance level with "the whole radical transformation of the mentality" of the performer and spectator (BT 23)? In 1927, Brecht first used the phrase "epic theatre" in print. In the same year he published his essay "The Epic Theatre and its Difficulties" and explained that the epic theatre was a theatrical style laid down by the new school of play-writing. The basic meaning of "epic" (in Brecht's use of it) is, as Willett summarized, "a sequence of incidents or events, narrated without artificial restrictions as to time, place or relevance to a formal 'plot'" (*Bertolt Brecht* 169). Brecht expounded the principles of the epic theatre and emphasized that "the essential point of the epic theatre is perhaps that it appeals less to the feelings than to the spectator's reason" (BT 23).

Esslin suggests that we must understand Brecht's theory of epic theatre as his counter-theory of the German classic theory of drama: "in 1797 Goethe and Schiller, the two giants of the German tradition, had jointly presented their point of view in an essay, 'On Epic and Dramatic Poetry'" (113). Esslin also notes that much of Brecht's

theoretical ideas were anticipated by Racine and Diderot. Indeed, Brecht's labeling of his theatre as "non-aristotelian" signifies that his theatre, counter to the Aristotelian concept of dramatic theatre, does not intend to invite audiences into believing that what is presented on stage is true. However, Brecht is hardly the first person to question and/or disturbs Aristotle's tradition of dramatic theatre. Brooker points out in his article "Key Words in Brecht's Theory and Practice" that the term "epic" was in use in German debates before Brecht adapted it. Furthermore, he listed several sources for Brecht's "epic theatre": "the political theatre of Erwin Piscator and German agitprop; the cabaret of Frank Wedekind and the work of the music hall comedian Karl Valentin; Charlie Chaplin and American silent film; Asia and revolutionary Soviet theatre; as well as Shakespeare and Elizabethan chronicle plays" (187).

What is clear is that Brecht's concept of epic theatre is not only a revolution of the stage as theatre. As Tatlow suggests, "its purpose was ultimately political" (Mask 286). In Brecht's 1927 essay "The Epic Theatre and its Difficulties," an appeal to reason/rationalism (other than feelings) becomes an important features in his concept of epic theatre and is associated with his three specific concerns, summed up by Willett, "the unemotional (or *Sachlich*) approach, the new economic and social subject-matter..., and...acting, as it were, in quotation marks and from foreknowledge, without ever pretending that cast and producers are unaware what is about to happen" (Bertolt Brecht 168).

Brecht emphasized that the epic theatre was a prerequisite for his theatre. Despite the fact that Brecht adopted the term "dialectical" very late in his life, we find Brecht dealing with dialectical concepts in his theoretical writings quite earlier than one might assume. In the article "The Film, the Novel and the Epic Theatre" (1930), for the first time he emphasized the idea of contradiction. The essay opens with the quotation, "Contradictions are our hope!" From that time the idea of contradiction became increasingly important in Brecht's works. And in yet another article "The Question of Criteria for Judging Acting" (1931), Brecht reflects upon the contradictory nature of language:

For over and above the meaning of the individual sentences a quite specific basic gest was being brought out here which admittedly depended on knowing what the individual sentences meant but at the same time used this meaning only as a means to an end. The speeches' content was made up of contradictions, and the actor had not to make the spectator identify himself with individual sentences and so get caught up in contradictions, but to keep him out of them. Taken as a whole it had to be the most objective possible exposition of a contradictory internal process. (BT 54)

By dealing with the innovation of play-writing and its relation with contradiction, Brecht is ultimately addressing the issue of language. Brecht does not resort to effective renunciation of the old structure; instead, he solicits subversion from within the old structure by exposing contradictions and internal oppositions upon which the apparatus is founded. The enterprise of his denunciation of bourgeois conceptions depends on the key idea of contradiction. In fact, the idea of contradiction not only works on the level of language, but is also central to Brecht's theatrical innovations on the part of the performer and spectator, and the composition of his dramatic works.

The operation of contradiction is inevitably related to the idea of subjectivity since the Brechtian theatre is intended to "divide its audience" (Brecht's words). Sartillot best summarizes the significance of contradiction in Brecht's epic theatre:

In the same way that Derrida's deconstruction cannot be reduced to a destruction of Western metaphysics, Brecht's epic theatre is not a destruction, an annihilation of dramatic theatre; rather, it should be regarded as a subversion of dramatic theatre, an inhabitation of its structures in order to reveal its contradictions. (121)

Echoing Sartillot's view, Jameson further claims that for Brecht the dialectic "is defined and constituted by the search for a discovery of contradictions" (79). Indeed, the dialectical method in Brecht's theatre, as Sartillot and Jameson suggest, could best be grasped by the construction of contradictions. However, does this suggest that Brecht's idea of dialectics amount solely to contradictions? In order to answer this question we shall roughly divide this discussion of Brecht's notion of contradiction into two categories: contradictions on the performance level (on the part of the spectator and performer) and contradictions within the text.

Brecht explicitly addresses the issue of how dialectical thinking is employed effectively in the participants of a performance (in this specific case the audience):

In calling for a direct impact, the aesthetics of the day call for an impact that flattens out all social and other distinctions between individuals. Plays of the aristotelian type still manage to flatten out class conflicts in this way although the individuals themselves are becoming increasingly aware of class differences. The same result is achieved even when class conflicts are the subjects of such plays, and even in cases where they take sides for a particular class. A collective entity is created in the auditorium for the *duration of the entertainment*, on the basis of the 'common humanity' shared by all spectators alike. Non-aristotelian drama of *Die Mutter's* sort is not interested in the establishment of such an entity. It

divides its audience. (BT 60)

In addition to revealing and even provoking social conflicts, Brecht's theatre is keen to bring out the contradictions engendered by class conflicts rooted in the socio-economic base. Apparently, the only way to resolve this overarching contradiction is to change society, as Brecht repeatedly emphasized. Contradiction, as implied here, is concrete and "a moment in a process rather than a static structure" (Jameson 79). As for the dialectics on the performance level, the activity of the *Verfremdungseffekt* is essentially dialectical and has a substantial relationship with Daoism and Chinese acting.³

In the succeeding discussion, however, emphasis will be put on the noticeable change of Brecht's terminology and his attitude towards his later understanding of dialectics by referring to the nine essays titled "Dialectics in the Theatre." While a Marxist dialectic is essential to Brecht, we should note that Brecht simplified his use of the theoretical vocabulary contradiction drawn from Marxist dialectics, and that in the process he narrowed down the more customary terms from Hegel and Marx. I argue that while Lao Zi's dialectics (together with concrete Daoist paradoxes) had been informing Brecht's thought since the 1920s, his investment in the dialectic is informed by Korsch's interpretation of Marxist dialectical materialism, and later in his life, is extended by Mao Zedong's ideas of contradiction. I begin my discussion by differentiating Brecht's understanding of contradiction from that of philosophical Marxism.

The central idea of Marxist dialectical materialism is contradiction. In "Afterword to the Second Edition" of *Capital*, Marx explains his dialectical methodology:

In its rational form it is a scandal and abomination to bourgeoisdom and its doctrinaire professors, because it includes in its comprehension an affirmative recognition of the existing state of things, at the same time also, the recognition of the negation of that state, of its inevitable breaking up; because it regards every historically developed social form as in fluid movement, and therefore takes into account its transient nature not less than its momentary existence; because it lets nothing impose upon it, and is in its essence critical and revolutionary. (xxx)

What is obvious is that the Marxist dialectic is central to Brecht's world view. At the heart of Brecht's dialectic materialism the same idea of change, contradiction, and a materialist conception of history is stressed. Yet, while he follows Marx's emphasis on the transient and historical nature of social forms, Brecht, as a playwright, considers contradiction to be fundamental to understanding the principles of dialectical

development, and is keener about unveiling concrete contradictions than exploring precisely how dialectical development of history (in Marx's sense) takes place within his plays. To provide a point of comparison, consider how in his *Dialectics of Nature*, Engels summarizes a Hegelian perspective on the dialectic method⁴:

The law of the transformation of quantity into quality and *vice versa*;
The law of the interpenetration of opposites; The law of the negation of the negation.

Tatlow noted that although Hegel is “the only philosopher to whom he [Brecht] gave more than cursory attention,” Brecht considered him a humorist and “made no systematic study of him” (*Mask* 364). In fact, these Hegelian ideas are never explored or consistently applied in Brecht's plays or theoretical essays. This explains why Brecht critics are suspicious that Brecht is clear about the nature of the dialectic. Tom Kuhn and Steve Giles, for example, remarked in their edited collection *Brecht on Art and Politics* (2003):

On the one hand, he implies that the contradictory processes uncovered by dialectical thinking are themselves objective features of reality.... On the other hand, he construes dialectic as a mode of cognition, a way of perceiving and understanding reality, and argues that dialectical concepts do not reflect a dialectic which exists in nature. (63)

Perhaps discussing Brecht's dialectic with reference to the meaning of the dialectical principle evidenced in Marx's writing is more misleading (and less fruitful) than referring to Korsch, with whom Brecht had begun a close intellectual friendship in 1926 (when Brecht attended his lectures on Marxism) and maintained their lifelong relationship till Brecht's death in 1956. According to Fred Halliday (in his introduction to Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy*), Brecht said that he chose Korsch and Fritz Sternberg as his Marxist instructors because they were not orthodox Party thinkers. Halliday recorded that it is Korsch's *Karl Marx* that “inspired Brecht to try to rewrite the *Communist Manifesto*...and in 1945 Brecht sent his draft to Korsch for comment” (21). An investigation of the Korschian version of the Marxist dialectic and Brecht's conception of dialectical materialism shall demonstrate that Brecht had relied heavily on Korsch's reading of Marxist dialectical materialism in both his aesthetic theory and practice.

In *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, when asked about how dialectical materialism plays in the theatrical theory, the Philosopher lists a few points:

The *self-evident*—i.e. the particular shape our consciousness gives our experience—is resolved into its components when counteracted by the A-effect and turned into a new form of the *evident*. An imposed schema is being broken up here. The individual's own experiences correct to confirm what he has taken over from the community. The original act of discovery is repeated.

The contradiction between empathy and detachment is made stronger and becomes an element in the performance.

Historicizing involves judging a particular social system from another social system's point of view. The standpoints in question results from the development of society. (100)

The first two points deal with the notion of contradiction—though on two different levels: whereas the first point suggests how contradictions within the individuals' experiences are, through the means of V-effect, exposed from within, the second one refers to the specific dialectical attitude (of empathy and detachment) adopted for both performers and audiences. The idea of historicization explains the purpose of Brecht's setting his plays in previous historical times: to enhance his audience's alertness in noticing the objective contradictions of the society as located in the hero.

In Korsch's *Karl Marx*—in which he summarizes his understanding of the basic principles of Marxism—we find nice parallels between Brecht's notion of historicization and Korsch's interpretation of Marx's principle of historic specification. Identifying it as the core of the Marxist dialectic, Korsch notes that Marx dealt with all economic, social and ideological concepts not through a general abstract description, but through “a detailed description of the definite relations which exist between definite economic phenomena on a definite historical level of development and definite phenomena which appear simultaneously or subsequently in every other field of political, juristic, and intellectual development” (“Why I am a Marxist”). While I have my reservations about Kellner's argument that the Korschian version of the Marxist dialectic is central to Brecht's work (29), such a shared emphasis on comprehending social issues and phenomena as historically specific does indicate the influence of Korsch on Brecht's conception of Marxist dialectics.

It becomes clear (from what has been discussed), firstly, that Brecht's dialectics contains a simplified and incomplete presentation of Marxist dialectics; secondly, that while Marxist dialectics (and Korsch's version of Marxist dialectics) identifies some important contradictions, such as the one between the exploiters and the exploited, it does not provide a specific perspective on contradiction; and thirdly, that although Brecht foregrounds contradiction as key to understanding the thematic issues of

his plays, Marxist principle of dialectical materialism, however, has little concrete contradictions (based on observations of man, and of man's relation to others) to offer. In one of his 1940 journal entries, he also elaborated on the concept of his theatre of dialectics with a sole emphasis on the notion of contradiction:

...it will probably be well nigh impossible to demand that reality be presented in such a way that it can be mastered, without pointing to the contradictory, ongoing character of conditions, events, figures, for unless you recognize the dialectical nature of reality it cannot be mastered. The a-effect makes it possible to enact this dialectical nature, that is what it is for; it's what explains it. Even when deciding on the titles that determine the blocking, it is not enough to demand eg merely a social quality; the titles must also contain a critical quality and announce a contradiction. They must be fully adaptable, so the dialectic (contradictoriness, the element of process) must be able to become concrete. The mysteries of the world are not solved, they are demonstrated. (*Journals* 120-21)

Here Brecht explains specifically what dialectic means in his theatre as: "contradictoriness" and "the element of process." At the core of Marxist contradiction is the assumption that the central contradiction is the one between the *social* means of production within the capitalist system and the *individual* sense of property ownership within the same system (the bourgeois mode of production is identified by Marx as the last antagonist form of it) (Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*), yet Daoism is built on the contemplation of contradictions in practical contexts. As is consistent with Brecht's claim that "truth is concrete," Brecht declares that the dialectic must as well be able to become concrete. Specific Taoist contradictions appear widely in *Me-Ti* and Brecht's plays, making it worth considering how the specific Daoist contradictions contribute to Brecht's thematic concerns in his plays. We shall revisit this topic later; suffice it to say here that while Brecht's dialectics is very much influenced by Korsch's version of Marxism, it is Daoist specific examples of contradiction in the *Tao Te Ching* that provide concrete examples in Brecht's plays. This journal entry also touches upon a disputed topic among Brecht critics, the dichotomy of emotion and reason.

Lao Zi is one of the main sources of Brecht's ideas about the role of contradiction, yet the impact of Lao Zi's dialectic on Brecht's work has not been adequately clarified. The *Tao Te Ching* provides the concrete contradictions applied in Brecht's dramatic texts, and those contradictions are employed in Brecht's instruction on how the actor should prepare for a role. In the series of nine articles (consisting of a letter, notes and dialogues) under the general heading of "Dialectics in the Theatre,"

Brecht explicitly addresses dialectical thinking and how it should be employed by the actor in rehearsal. We shall give a brief review of these essays to see how they relate to Lao Zi's concrete paradoxes.⁵

In "A Diversion on *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*," Brecht points out the contradictory feelings Grusha has towards her interests and towards the child. In "*Mother Courage Performed in Two Ways*," Brecht says that it is the contradictory roles of peddler and of mother which disfigure the character. These two pieces pose problems for interpreting the characters and for the theatrical treatment of characterization. At first glance, the contradictions in the two characters seem to be irrelevant; however, they point to one common observation of human virtue by Lao Zi: the relativity of the virtue of goodness and the paradox of usefulness.

In "A Letter to the Actor Playing the Young Hörder in *Winterschlacht*" Brecht points out the need for knowledge of history in presenting contradictory attitudes of fear and sympathy. "Another Case of Applied Dialectics" and the note "Conversation about Being Forced into Empathy" are two reported discussions of the contradictory aspect of performance; i.e. how to reconcile two opposing elements (emotion and reason) in presenting the inner conflicts of the characters. The contradictory principles in Brecht's vision of staging and acting within the theatrical space (i.e., the dialectical relation between emotion and reason), as we shall see later, are already predicted in the Chinese theatre.

In his essay "Study of Shakespeare's 'Coriolanus'," Brecht refers to Mao's distinction between dominant and secondary contradictions and makes a connection with the Chinese political situation while analyzing with his company the initial conflict in Shakespeare's play between the Roman plebeians and patricians and their subsequent unity under Marcius Coriolanus in a war against the Volscians. The original conversation is as follows:

We shall have to go back to the classic method of mastering such complex events. I marked a passage in Mao Tse-tung's essay 'On Contradiction.' What does he say?

That in any given process which involves many contradictions there is always a main contradiction that plays the leading, decisive part; the rest are of secondary, subordinate significance. One example he gives is the Chinese Communists' willingness, once the Japanese attacked, to break off their struggle against Chiang Kai-Shek's reactionary regime. (BT 261)

This quotation is often recognized as representing, in Brooker's words, "an addition to Brecht's canon of Marxist classics, and is in itself evidence of the extension and

revision his theory was undergoing” (*Bertolt Brecht* 21-2). Tatlow even suggests that “Mao’s affirmation of perpetual change,” inspired Brecht, whose drama aimed “to awaken and stimulate awareness of contradiction,” and one consequence of Brecht’s reconsideration of dialectics “was his decision to change the description of his theatre from “epic” to “dialectical” (523). Noting the fact that Brecht died two years later after he read Mao’s “On Contradiction” (written in 1937)—which he thought was the best book of 1954—it would be misleading to suggest that Mao’s essay alone could make a tremendous influence upon Brecht’s notion of contradiction. Yet Mao’s thought on contradiction—which is an appropriation of the writings of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Lao Zi—does enrich Brecht’s concept of contradiction. As we can see in “On *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*” (1956), Brecht classifies the contradictions within that play into primary contradictions and other contradictions. He identifies the two primary contradictions as follows: “The more Grusha promotes the child’s life the more she threatens her own: her productivity tends toward her own destruction” (91); and “Azdak is the disappointed one who does not turn into the one who disappoints” (91). The other contradictions concerning characters such as the petitioners, the farmers and the architects are considered minor.

Notes

1. Tatlow thinks that the *Tao De Ching* is an expression of “a peasant dialectic.” To explain his ideas, he makes a comparison between Marx’s and Mao’s assessment of the potential role of the peasantry in any revolutionary process:

Marx saw the peasants as a conservative if not reactionary force, considering them little more than ‘rural idiots.’ Mao, on the other hand, would seem to have placed greater trust in their native intelligence and capabilities and consequently to have expected a certain spontaneity of response to the opportunities presented by the process of replacing rural feudalism with rural democracy. (“Peasant Dialectics” 278)

2. This passage is taken from an interview by Bernard Guillemin. The interview is not in Brecht’s own words, but Guillemin, the interviewer prefaced it with a note saying that he had “deliberately translated into normal language all that Brecht told me in his own manner, in Brecht-style slang” (BT 35).

3. In my doctoral dissertation *Brecht and China: Towards an Ethical Subject I* examines the entangled relation within the dichotomies in the Brechtian theatre such as emotion and reason, reality and illusion, identification and alienation, and performer and spectator.

4. For a full discussion of the origin and evolution of the term dialectic, see Carney p. 6.

5. With no access to the English translation of most of these essays, I refer to Brooker’s summary of them in his book *Bertolt Brecht: Dialectics, Poetry, Politics*. See Brooker 17-33.

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