

## **Bad Brecht: Restoring Mei Lanfang's Personhood Within a Colonizer Discourse**

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### **Part I: Brecht's Story**

Bertolt Brecht is heralded as one of the most important political theatre makers and thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Known for his politically engaged, deconstructionist theatre, Brecht is championed for peeling back the guise of realism in his work. Brecht's "epic theatre" is motivated by his Marxist influence as it aims to reveal and critique capitalist societies and economies for their extractive qualities. It does this by making it clear to the audience that what happens onstage is not real, highlighting its construction using techniques such as montage, *gestus*, music, sign cards, and breaking the fourth wall. One of the key tenets of his work is the alienation effect, which prompts actors to estrange their performance, "quoting" their characters rather than closely aligning themselves with them. Brecht's alienation effect was inspired and concretized by a theatrical demonstration in Moscow, 1935 by Chinese *dan* actor Mei Lanfang. Not often discussed among Brecht's theatrical discourse, his epic theatre as we understand it today would not exist without this intercultural interaction and Brecht's consequent appropriation and extraction of Mei Lanfang's performance.

In this paper, I critique his canonization as a theatre maker in the Western project by analyzing his misreading of the Chinese theatre as a way of legitimizing his alienation effect. Furthermore, I demonstrate that this misinterpretation contributed to the erasure of Mei Lanfang's personhood and the performance politics deeply rooted within it. I aim to restore his personhood by elaborating on Mei Lanfang's story and significance, and, in doing so, reveal a complicated web of the

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colonizer-colonized relationship between China and the West. I punctuate Brecht's role in this dynamic, despite his contribution to a sociopolitical and artistic context that aimed to critique capitalism and exploitation.

Walter Benjamin described Brecht's epic theatre as the ultimate political artistic production, asserting that it's not only an effective tool for critiquing the sociopolitical and economic climate of mid-twentieth century Europe but a robust art form that does something different with its form and content.<sup>1</sup> Benjamin asserted that Brecht was one of the first practitioners to encourage intellectuals to contribute to the production apparatus in a socialist manner.<sup>2</sup> He saw Brecht's theatre as a model for other writers, thinkers, and artists, as it is a theatre that *does* something for social change and disruption. Believing it to be a "theatre for our time," Benjamin praised epic theatre for its bare-bones aesthetic, intervention within the audience-actor and actor-character relationship, representation of conditions rather than actions, and use of montage.<sup>3</sup> Benjamin put Brechtian theatre on a pedestal, demonstrating its timeliness and importance for mid-twentieth century thought. Thinkers like Benjamin performed Brecht into the theoretical and methodological canon through engagement with his work and reinforcing his importance.

Benjamin's enthusiastic endorsement of Brecht can be attributed to the fact that the theatre maker was creating performance that was nestled within and responded to a changing sociopolitical climate driven by Marxism. Karl Marx aimed to bring the common interests of the proletariat to the forefront and abolish bourgeois property.<sup>4</sup> He asserted that the working class were slaves to the bourgeois, their labor exploited for those that were classed above them. Though not explicitly a Marxist theatre, Brecht's work reflected the churning discussions of exploitation, labor, and the strife of the working class that were happening among Marxist thinkers of the time. Brecht's theatre was largely revelatory, pulling back the guise of polished society to reveal its dark underbelly. Brecht's contribution was using theatre to explicitly show the mechanics beneath the dramatic mise-en-scene. It reflected the Marxist ethos of being a theatre for "the people."

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin, Walter, "The Author as Producer." In *Understanding Brecht* (London: Verso, 1998), 85-103.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin, 93.

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin, 99.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The Communist Manifesto," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 469-500.

Brecht's theatre also reflected Marxism through its grappling with the material world and making actors interact with it. The aesthetics of Brechtian theatre coincide with the Marxist commitment to the idea that reality cannot be identified simply through ideology, thought, and the mind but rather through material reality. Marx was concerned with the "stuff" of reality—its matter and make-up—as well as the people that construct reality. Through this "subjective materialism," Marx drew attention to the way in which people made reality through concrete activities. According to Marx, humans are the center of everything and therefore, human practice determines everything. Not only was Brecht's epic theatre recognized for disrupting the way that theatre was done at the time, it was a model for art-as-political disruption. Through his pared-down aesthetics, Brecht broke down the popular Stanislavskian realism for a theatre that made no efforts to conceal the mechanisms behind the dramatic guise. He brought theatre down to the human, the material world, and the way that humans create and interact with the material world. Actors would often break the fourth wall or hold up sign cards delineating what the audience should "get" from the play.

Though in some ways, Brechtian theatre was very much grounded in the world and refused to engage in the illusion of realist theatre, he also wished to estrange it. As Marxist thinkers of the time were rethinking the reconstruction of the world, Brecht was reshaping the way that theatre was created and presented. One of the key ways Brecht did this was through montage, where he would splice together different scenes that didn't flow together perfectly. Each scene was undergirded by a *gestus*, which "takes up the idea of a pregnant moment."<sup>5</sup> The *gestus*, along with montage, fit into Brecht's overarching concept of the alienation effect or the *Verfremdungseffekt* which is one of the trademark concepts of his theatre. These techniques serve as tools for unveiling, highlighting, and estranging the world that the audience expects to see on stage. They coincide with a Marxist agenda of forcing the audience to reconsider the conventions of which they have become comfortable. In the next section, I will detail the origins of the alienation effect and how its conceptualization was grounded in Brecht's practice of extraction and appropriation.

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<sup>5</sup> Roswitha Mueller, "Montage in Brecht," *Theatre Journal* 39, no. 4 (1987): 474, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3208249>.

### The Birth of the Alienation Effect

The idea behind the alienation effect or the *Verfremdungseffekt* is that it makes the familiar strange, pulling both the actor and audience out of the theatrical realism. Through the alienation effect, the actor creates distance between himself/herself and the character, as well as the audience. Brecht secured the alienation effect because of his encounter with Chinese actor Mei Lanfang. Exiled from Germany, Brecht met Mei Lanfang in Moscow when Mei Lanfang's theatre company was on its European tour. Their encounter took place during a gathering of theatre practitioners; their meeting was based in a context of intercultural artistic exchange. Brecht was in the audience as the famed Chinese actor performed a brief segment from *The Fisherman's Revenge*. Brecht became enamored with Mei's performance, using it to legitimize the nascent ideas of his alienation effect. He came to this performance armed with the threads of this theory and upon watching this demonstration, all of his nascent ideas snapped into place for him. What started as a site of intercultural interaction shifted into a hub from which Brecht could extract and appropriate performance traditions that he did not truly understand.

In his piece *On Chinese Acting*, Brecht describes his interpretation of Chinese theatre and how it demonstrates his alienation effect.<sup>6</sup> Starting the piece by stating, "In the following paper something will be said about the use of "alienation" in Chinese acting," Brecht immediately refers to Chinese acting in relation to his own theory.<sup>7</sup> This rhetorical strategy is par for the course for his narrow Western interpretation of Chinese theatre. Brecht's first observation is that the Chinese actor—he doesn't address Mei Lanfang by name just yet—talks to the audience by breaking the fourth wall and "makes it clear that he knows he is being looked at. Thus, one of the illusions of the European stage is set aside."<sup>8</sup> Brecht's interpretation of Mei Lanfang's performance is complex and multi-layered. It initially seems as though Brecht describes Chinese performance in relation to his European context and not on its own merit. Mei Lanfang is not setting aside any European technique in favor of the Chinese performance tradition—he's performing what he knows. Yet, it's clear that Brecht recognizes a quality of Mei Lanfang's performance that is significant and unlike anything he has seen before. In a way, he is bracketing his own theatrical background to make room for something new. According to

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<sup>6</sup> Bertolt Brecht, "On Chinese Acting," trans. Eric Bentley, *The Tulane Drama Review* 6, no. 1 (1961): 130-136, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1125011>.

<sup>7</sup> Brecht, 130.

<sup>8</sup> Brecht, 130.

Min Tian, the Chinese actor does not separate himself from his character when talking to the audience.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, the actor is less concerned with being looked at and more concerned with maintaining the stage illusion.<sup>10</sup> Brecht's second observation is that the Chinese actor "*looks at himself*" to appear "alien" to the spectator.<sup>11</sup> This observation is not at all what Mei Lanfang was aiming to do. While Brecht saw alienation, Mei Lanfang was concerned with essence.<sup>12</sup> Brecht's observations on Mei's performance and the techniques behind Mei's performance can co-exist. Brecht saw what he saw, without prior knowledge of the mechanics of Chinese theatre. Simultaneously, Mei's performance was influenced by a performance tradition that only Mei and other Chinese performance had access to. This dynamic is typical of the audience-actor relationship in which the audience sees and interprets one thing, while the actor was actually doing something else. The danger for Brecht in this instance is that through his social power as a prominent European theatre maker, he could call this performance whatever he wanted and knew that people would listen. His own interpretation held more power than the true mechanisms of Mei's performance. As a result, whatever Brecht wrote about Mei's performance became The Word—Mei's labor was left in the dust. In an ideal scenario, Brecht would have engaged with Mei during this setting of intercultural artistic exchange and learned from the artist himself. Unfortunately, Brecht was too enthused with his own "discovery" that he did not participate in genuine engagement. Brecht saw what he wanted to see and grossly misinterpreted this performance according to the Western way.

Ironically, Chinese actors are more similar to the realistic, Stanislavskian actors Brecht aimed to distance himself from. They are encouraged to forget about acting and align themselves with their characters as closely as possible. Mei Lanfang spearheaded the move away from Chinese theatre as comprised of singing and dancing and more towards "characterization performance" (*xingge hua biao*), which stresses the inner life of the character and authenticity of thoughts and feelings.<sup>13</sup> The famed Chinese actor describes his methods, stating:

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<sup>9</sup> Min Tian, "'Alienation-Effect' for Whom? Brecht's (Mis)interpretation of the Classical Chinese Theatre," *Asian Theatre Journal* 14, no. 2 (1997): 200-222, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1124277>.

<sup>10</sup> Tian, 205.

<sup>11</sup> Brecht, "On Chinese Acting," 130.

<sup>12</sup> Martin, Carol. "Brecht, Feminism, and Chinese Theatre." *The Drama Review* 43, no. 4 (n.d.): 77-85.

<sup>13</sup> Tian, "'Alienation Effect' For Whom?" 211.

Everyone says that some excellent performer can become the very image of any character he is impersonating. This means that not only his appearance but also his singing, reciting, movements, spirit, and feelings must become so closely identical with the status of the character that it is as if he were really that character. In the meanwhile, the spectators, spellbound by his performance, forget that he is a performer and accept him as the character. It is only in this realm, in which it is difficult to tell the performer from the character, that the performer, while singing, merges into the situation of the play. This alone is the highest realm.<sup>14</sup>

Brecht wrongly assumed that alienation is part of Chinese acting. If Brecht had taken the time to participate in actual dialogic exchange *with* Mei Lanfang, he would know that the actor was doing something entirely different from the alienation effect and was concerning himself with the embodiment of his character. Perhaps Brecht saw strangeness as a result of already estranging Mei Lanfang within his exoticized Orientalist mind. He saw Other and used it for his own gain, rather than engaging with the performance from a position of neutrality. Brecht was not primed or situated to learn from this performance but rather projected his own Western framework onto something new to him.

Not only did Brecht disregard Mei Lanfang's wholly naturalistic performance, forcing it to fit within his own framework but he made it very clear that the actor was just a prop in his own Western theatrical imagination. In *On Chinese Acting*, he writes for a Western audience and appeals to their pre-conceived notions of Chinese theatre. Brecht says, "In many ways the art of the Chinese actor seems to the western actor cold. Not that the Chinese theatre renounces the presentation of feelings! The actor presents events of considerable passionateness, but his delivery remains unimpassioned."<sup>15</sup> In trying to debunk negative Western perceptions of Chinese theatre, he reinforces them. Furthermore, he is only interested in Chinese theatre so long as he can extract what he wants from it. He states, "A technical feature like the alienation effect in Chinese acting can be studied with profit only by those who *need* such a feature for particular social purposes. As charm, novelty, finesse, and formalistic frivolity it could never become significant."<sup>16</sup> In this sense, Chinese theatre is legitimate only when compared to his alienation effect. It cannot stand on its own. Brecht follows a similar pattern of colonizers who only value Other when it is useful to them. Otherwise, they are quick

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<sup>14</sup> Mei Lanfang, *Wutai shenghuo sishinian* (My Forty-Year Stage Life) (Beijing: Pingmin Chubanshe, 1951).

<sup>15</sup> Brecht, "On Chinese Acting", 131.

<sup>16</sup> Brecht, 134.

to degrade and destroy. This is evident in the way Brecht describes Chinese theatre at the beginning of his text and quickly trumps it with his own ideas when it is no longer relevant. Brecht is no better than the slew of Western theorists and theatre makers--in particular--who muscle their European bravado and male genius to maintain their legitimacy. They are not concerned with getting it right or being questioned, yet they are always followed.

Brecht participated in an act of violence against the Chinese theatre. While he criticized Western realistic actors for "raping" the audience by forcing them to feel what the character feels, Brecht unconsensually strongarmed his Western know-all into this performance tradition.<sup>17</sup> Much like the "cutting out" or *decoupage* of Brechtian montage, he spliced and cut whatever he wanted from Mei Lanfang's performance.<sup>18</sup> In his communication of Chinese theatre to a Western audience, Brecht not only appropriated the theatre tradition for his own use but erased Mei Lanfang's personhood. Although he comes from a Marxist context and is praised for how his theatre marries political discourse with ground-up creation, he does the very thing that he critiques. Brecht uses techniques like *gestus*, montage, and his "newly discovered" alienation effect to comment on the way that society covers up the exploitation of the working class and the mechanics that create the illusions of theatre and everyday life. Yet, Brechtian theatre as we know it is only possible because Brecht was an exploiter himself.

At the heart of this appropriation is an imbalance of power between East and West, between Brecht, white European theatre maker and Mei Lanfang, an Asian actor. On a base level, Brecht was executing his white power over a non-European individual. Yet the Marxist context from which he came further scaffolded his colonialist actions. Though attuned to anti-racism, Marxists had not fully fleshed out the inequalities between races in their class-based theories. They were more concerned with how capitalism unfolds to exploit the working class via its owners and producers, rather than explaining racial conflict.<sup>19</sup> Brecht's interaction with Mei Lanfang occurred within a context where Brecht certainly was not thinking about positionality but neither were the thinkers around him. They had no problem fighting against the corruption of the working class by The (White) Man but are blind to the way their identity is The (White) Man when confronted with the foreigners or people of color. Though perhaps unknown to Brecht, his

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<sup>17</sup> Brecht, 132.

<sup>18</sup> Mueller, "Montage in Brecht," 473.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formations in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

Orientalist impulse ran rampant in his engagement with Mei Lanfang. He didn't see himself as doing anything wrong or misunderstanding Mei's performance because his Western arrogance was getting in the way. Brecht's theatre can still hold a place of prominence within the theatrical canon, yet he must be accountable for his actions and Mei Lanfang's work and efforts must still be recognized.

In appropriating Mei Lanfang's Chinese theatrical tradition, Brecht participated in an erasure of his personhood. He objectified the performer and the performance itself in order to take from it. Furthermore, discussing and critiquing this incident dually erases Mei Lanfang's personhood because it positions him as a victim within Brecht's story. Mei Lanfang is a key part of this narrative but he also has his own history which is important and relevant to understanding not only Chinese theatre but the intercultural dialogue between the East and the West. In this next section, I will turn the story towards the prolific actor in attempts to put his personhood back into the narrative and demonstrate his impact on Chinese theatre, nationalism, and East-West relations.

## Part II: Mei Lanfang's Story

Mei Lanfang was the most important actor in China during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. "The king of actors" (*liyuan da wang*), Mei Lanfang was known for being a *dan* actor or an actor who played women's roles. Women at the time were not permitted onstage, though China was starting to modernize their theaters.<sup>20</sup> For example, the arrangement of the Chinese stage shifted from the elitist "teahouse" style that sat people according to rank to a crescent-shaped stage that gave all audience member a similar stage view.<sup>21</sup> This was reflective of a shift in the post-Enlightenment subject-object relationship and China becoming less of an imperial state but a national state. This could also be indicative of China trying to keep up with global modern trends. Additionally, Mei Lanfang played *dan* roles amidst a growing female audience and shifts to women's urban public life.<sup>22</sup> Mei Lanfang's career thrived amidst a developing China, bridging tradition with modernity.

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<sup>20</sup> Goldstein, Joshua. "Mei Lanfang and the Nationalization of Peking Opera, 1912-1930," *Positions* 7, no. 2 (1999): 388.

<sup>21</sup> Goldstein, 389.

<sup>22</sup> Goldstein, 391.



Mei Lanfang was known for his virtuous performance skills, presenting captivating visuals dripping in beauty and grace. He was known for playing the archetype of the heroic, tortured heroine and contributed to a developing Chinese female archetype, the *huashan*, who was characterized as the king's favorite concubine, marked by elegance and sumptuous attire.<sup>23</sup> Audiences were enthralled by Mei's ability to capture femininity in his roles, transforming himself into the characters he was playing without being overtly sexual or obscene. He maintained a delicate balance of evoking purity while also invoking desire among his male and expanding female audience members. The performer embodied both the male and female gaze, taunting what onlookers wanted but could not have. Most importantly, Mei Lanfang's allure as a *dan* actor was demonstrative of the Chinese patriarchal structure. He played a particular version of woman very well—better than any woman could or was able to do. His popular performance reified a particular version of femininity with the caveat that this image was only achievable by men—or more specifically—a very talented man. Mei Lanfang existed in a strange in-between space of gender, desire, and performance. Only this famed actor could draw the eyes and hearts of men and women while perpetuating a patriarchal standard that prevented actresses from taking the stage themselves.

Mei Lanfang's appeal stretched beyond his theatrical audiences. The media was particularly important in constructing Mei as a sex symbol, naming him "China's most beautiful man/woman."<sup>24</sup> Not only was he well-known for his talent but his physical attractiveness. Journalists described him as "exquisitely dignified, a handsome playboy, a youthful bride, and a natural-born sex kitten."<sup>25</sup> His onstage and offstage appeal blurred together, which calls back to Mei's assertion that the highest realm of performance is when the character and the actor become inseparable. His appearance was androgynous in a way, "man-enough" for women to be attracted to him but soft (i.e. feminine) enough that he was also noticed by men. Mei's ability to be seen as both man and woman was indicative of his performative prowess, an increasingly diversified audience, and over-compensated sexualization on behalf of the lack of women onstage.

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<sup>23</sup> Goldstein, 394.

<sup>24</sup> Goldstein, 396.

<sup>25</sup> Goldstein, 396.

Mei Lanfang's status was positioned within a particular body politic that is revelatory of China's patriarchal view on gender and performance. At the core of Mei Lanfang's success was the particular corporeality that he maintained and shared with audiences. They wanted to view and consume his corporeality, as well as his mastery over it. His body was sexed, gendered, and later rendered as a sex symbol. People were less interested in what Mei Lanfang had to say but rather the optics of who he was and what he did. He was a desirable, moving image that served as a canvas for the ideologies of Chinese culture, the state, and his adoring fans.

Though Mei Lanfang assumed a homoerotic positionality for both men and women, being a sex symbol was only appropriate so long as he was a *dan* actor. His appeal came from being able to switch in and out of performing womanhood, but he still had the social capital of being a man. Were he a woman, the spectator response would have perhaps been much bawdier, if not more scrutinizing. He operated within a gendered, sexualized liminal space where people grappled with being attracted to his womanhood and translated this into their perception of his manhood and being.

Mei Lanfang's biopolitical position was also evident in his role as a representative of Chinese culture. Beyond being a major Chinese celebrity, Mei Lanfang also served as a cultural ambassador. Mei was an icon of model citizenship and national culture, serving as a pawn for China's desire to modernize and forge U.S. relations. Through tours in Europe and the United States, Mei Lanfang captured Western audiences and introduced them to Chinese theatre as a marker of Chinese nationalism. Goldstein states, "The ambition behind the effort to recode Peking opera as national culture was to prove that an "authentic" form of Chinese culture could at the same time be wholly compatible with and conducive to building a modern nation."<sup>26</sup> Mei Lanfang was used to prove that China could have a hand in the modern world and appeal to Western desires.

This sensationalism of Mei Lanfang as a Chinese cultural ambassador was peculiar, as actors are typically ranked among the lower class, among prostitutes. Moreover, Mei Lanfang's popularity largely came from his sex appeal that was brought forth by his talent as a *dan* actor. It's strange that China chose to present itself to the modern world through a performer known for his gender-bending. One would think that China would want to present itself as overtly masculine—able to keep up with Western superpowers and separating itself from the Eastern

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<sup>26</sup> Goldstein, 399.

stereotypes of subversiveness and femininity. But instead, the Chinese state put forth a *dan* actor as a representation of China's culture, and he still managed to grab the attention of Western audiences. Though the actor was incredibly acclaimed and famous, his performances as a woman perpetuated the Western perception of China as effeminate. Perhaps his performance appealed to Western audiences not only for his skill but for the very fact that his portrayals *affirmed* the West's perception of the East. Described by Goldstein as "tactical Orientalism," Mei's tours used spectacle and appeals to the Western gaze via essentialism to forge East-West relations and promote a positive image of China. The Chinese cultural image was concentrated within Mei Lanfang, who was not only a symbol of model Chinese citizenship but China itself. He was an Orientalist artifact presented to the West in order to serve the desires of the East: acceptance in the modern world, to whatever end.

Mei Lanfang's acclaim as a *dan* actor, sex symbol, and Chinese cultural ambassador complicates his role within Brecht's misreading of the Moscow, 1935 demonstration. His complex history is completely left out of Brecht's self-aggrandizing "discovery" of the alienation effect. Brecht failed to understand the context from which this prolific actor comes from, only being interested in what he can take from him. This extraction is exacerbated by the biopolitical context of Mei Lanfang as a *dan* actor. Brecht's masculine braggadocio was eager to exploit Mei's representation as effeminate and subversive, not only because he was from China but because he was playing a woman. More than that, Mei Lanfang's skill made his *dan* performance all the more convincing, blurring the lines between the male actor and his female character. Brecht appropriated this Chinese theatre tradition not only because of his colonizer impulse but because it felt like he was taking it from a *woman*. The appearance of Mei Lanfang as effeminate as well as his tactical Orientalism that pandered to the West's perception of the East as weak made Brecht's privileged interpretation all the more doable. Furthermore, Brecht's encounter with Mei Lanfang reinforces the actor's role as a pawn within a larger scheme to appeal to the West. Mei Lanfang was used by the Chinese government to be a nice face (and a nice body) for the Western world. He utilized his sex appeal and androgenicity to appeal to Western audiences. His performance as a *dan* actor enabled him to show off both his technical skill and effeminate attraction—both of which were consumed by European onlookers and served to perpetuate the Eastern stereotype of effeminacy in the Western imagination. Mei Lanfang became "thingified flesh" through his sexualization and objectification

among his Chinese audience and the media.<sup>27</sup> Relaying Mei's story as someone who was thingified and taken advantage of performs the erasure of personhood that this narrative aims to prevent. In attempting to restore Mei Lanfang's personhood, I reveal the many ways in which he was not understood as a person.

Another complicating factor to the story between Mei Lanfang and Bertolt Brecht is that Brecht was also a cultural ambassador for China and played a role in the modernization of its theaters. According to He, China experienced a "Brecht craze" in the 1950s.<sup>28</sup> The People's Republic of China looked to socialist thinkers, writers, and artists to progress their new nation. With Brecht being a Marxist thinker and playwright, his ideas were welcomed by the country's socio-political needs.<sup>29</sup> His techniques and plays took root in the Chinese theatre community through their translation and study. Brecht's popularity even extended to Mao Zedong, who learned about the German theatre maker from other Brechtian fanatics and thus expanded his reach even further. As a result, the "Brecht craze" of 1959 peaked in the same year as when the Chinese government formulated a series of activities signifying diplomatic relations between the People's Republic of China and the German Democratic Republic.<sup>30</sup> Like Mei Lanfang, Brecht served as a link between the East and the West. Though, the major difference between the two is that Brecht—a Western thinker and practitioner—had authority and agency over the way he was interpreted and Mei Lanfang—a Chinese actor—did not.

In this paper, I have disturbed the canonization of Bertolt Brecht as a theorist and theatre maker of the Western project by painting him as a colonizer who extracted his alienation effect from Chinese actor Mei Lanfang. Scaffolded by illustrating how Brecht interacted with Marxism, I argued that he participated in a cycle of exploitation in which he performed the very thing he aimed to critique by interpreting Mei Lanfang's performance for his own needs and using it to apprehend the abuse of the working class. In doing this, Brecht erased Mei Lanfang's personhood and made him a pawn within his own theoretical imagination. I then attempted to restore Mei Lanfang's personhood by demonstrating that he was one of the most important actors in China not only for his portrayal of female

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<sup>27</sup> Lisa Calvente, personal communication, November 17, 2022.

<sup>28</sup> He, Weiping. "Bertolt Brecht's Theatrical Concept of Alienation Effect and the Chinese Application and Transformation." *Neohelicon* 46, no. 1 (2019): 53-67. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11059-018-0468-3>.

<sup>29</sup> He, 58.

<sup>30</sup> He, 59.

characters and for being a sex symbol, but as serving as a cultural ambassador for China. I aim to tell more of the story that Brecht left out in his description of Mei Lanfang's performance.

Bertolt Brecht still remains part of the Western canon of theatre and, like many canonized Western philosophers, will continue to be taught, referenced, and critiqued. His impact on modern theatre through his use of estrangement and political engagement is profound and cannot easily be wiped away because of his lewd misinterpretation of Mei Lanfang. In another sense, we cannot "cancel" Brecht. And we do not need to necessarily cancel Brecht. We can, however, aim to understand the whole story and engage with epic theatre alongside his misreading. The story between Brecht and Mei Lanfang is propped up by a power imbalance between the East and the West fueled by colonialism. Marxism and its limitations are also an equally important backdrop, as they demonstrate how the failure of this philosophy to address and think through race encourages and allows for Western thinkers to blindly exploit people of color while believing themselves to be champions of "the people." As critical scholars, we must strive to understand the context and implications of the theories that we study. This does not mean that we do not use them but go one step further in acknowledging the ramifications of ideas that we take for granted. Brecht's interaction with Mei Lanfang not only points to problems of colonialism but also of Marxism. Additionally, Mei Lanfang's story demonstrates the ways in which Asian theatre participated in this East-West power imbalance by attempting to gain cultural (and even perhaps economic) capital by performing exoticism, respectability, and tactical Orientalism.

In praxis, theorists, theatre makers, and scholars should continue to acknowledge how exploring canonized philosophers reinforces their value and place within the Western project. But more importantly, we must aim to look beyond our Western context and learn from artists like Mei Lanfang — artists and thinkers who are relegated to the margins of the Western narrative. This might take shape in teaching Brecht's epic theatre and alienation effect, while simultaneously learning the techniques and impact of Mei Lanfang himself. However, we must be excruciatingly careful to not make the same mistake as Brecht and learn without adding our own Westernized interpretation. The excitement to expand the Western performative imagination through learning from other cultures is in tension with trying not to appropriate that tradition. We must consider what it means to learn, what it means to step back, and what it means to move forward in our

critical thought and praxis. Yet, the reigning commitment that we must latch onto is, for once, let someone else do the talking.



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