

# A HEAVENLY ASSEMBLY ON THE CHINESE STAGE: *JESUS, CONFUCIUS AND JOHN LENNON*\*

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This essay is an attempt to analyse the first act of the play by the contemporary Chinese playwright Sha Yexin (\*1939) *Jesus, Confucius and John Lennon* (1987) which raised a havoc among the men responsible for the cultural policy in China of the end of the 1980s, was forbidden after several runs and never performed publicly there. This farcical play imitates the heavenly assemblies as known from the oldest writings from the Near East, Israel and Judah before Christian era and shows the great personalities of religion (Jesus), philosophy (Confucius) and art (Lennon) on the heaven before the fall of the world communist system and prepared to go as the messengers or commissioners of God to both the capitalist and socialist countries of the world, including Red China, to see the life and suffering of millions, or even hundreds of millions of inhabitants. The second, third and four acts are not analyzed in this essay.

**Key words:** Heavenly assembly, Jesus, Confucius, John Lennon, world situation in the 1980s

## 1

I hope that my readers will allow me to start with my reminiscences. From October 12 – 26, 1989 together with Professor Oldřich Král of Prague, I had the possibility to visit Peking and Shanghai as a guest of the Ministry of Culture of the PRC. In Peking after some difficulties I met Professor Wang Meng 王蒙 (\*1934), a well-known Chinese writer, in the villa of Professor Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 (1868 – 1940), the first Chancellor of Peking University, after reading and

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writing about his work *Shizijia shang* 十字架上 *On the Cross*,<sup>1</sup> and in Shanghai after the title of “Advisory Professor” of Chinese and Comparative Literature was conferred upon me, I met Mr. Sha Yexin 沙叶新 (\*1939), another famous playwright on October 21, 1989. I wrote about him earlier in my essay: “In the Footsteps of the Inspector General: Two Contemporary Chinese Plays”.<sup>2</sup> I understand the difficulties with Wang Meng because on September 4 of the same year he was asked to resign as a Minister of Culture and I was told that Comrade Wang Meng was very busy, but in the case of Sha Yexin, who otherwise was very critical of the social and political situation in China in the time after the Cultural Revolution (1966 – 1976), there were no problems at all. Even after writing and publishing his satirical play *Jiaru wo shi zhen de* 假如我是真的 *If I Were Real* (1979) he was allowed to remain a Director of the Renmin yishu juyuan 人民艺术剧院 People’s Art Theatre in Shanghai. Otherwise apart from several runs in this theatre in 1979, his play was never publicly performed in the PRC.

We met him together with Professor Král in his office and discussed with him the situation in his theatre and about the situation in theatre in general. After June 4, 1989 we observed nervousness and insecurity everywhere. Our hosts, in spite of our requests, did not offer us any theatre performance or opera. Sha Yexin presented me his book *Yesu, Kongzi, pitoushi Lienong* 耶稣, 孔子, 披头士列侬 *Jesus, Confucius and John Lennon*. For me it was a surprise. I knew that he wrote *Chen Yi shizhang* 陈毅市长 *Mayor Chen Yi*, a historical drama (1980) about Chen Yi (1901 – 1972), the marshal of the PLA, mayor of Shanghai, and Minister of Foreign Affairs after February 1958, and *Makesi mi shi* 马克思秘史 *Secret History of Karl Marx* (1983). In contrast to the *Mayor Chen Yi* which was well received by the critics as giving a perfect model of a revolutionary member

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<sup>1</sup> Published in the journal *Zhongshan* 钟山 3, May 15, 1988, pp. 45 – 58 and translated into English by WICKERY, J. “On the Cross”. In *Renditions*, pp. 43 – 48. More on this work GÁLIK, M. Wang Meng’s Mythopoeic Vision of Golgotha and Apocalypse. In *Annali. Istituto Universitario Orientale* (Napoli), pp. 61 – 82 and its German version translated by FINDEISEN, R. D. Mythopoetische Vision von Golgatha and Apocalypse bei Wang Meng. In *minima sinica*, pp. 52 – 82. Also his “Parody and Absurd Laughter in Wang Meng’s *Apocalypse*. Musings over the Metamorphosis of the Biblical Vision in Contemporary Chinese Literature,” in SCHMIDT-GLINTZER, H. (hrsg). *Das andere China. Festschrift für Wolfgang Bauer zum 65. Geburtstag*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag 1995, pp. 449 – 461 and in *Influence, Translation and Parallels. Selected Studies on the Bible in China*. Sankt Augustin: Monumenta Serica Institute 2004, pp. 315 – 326. This last also appeared in the Chinese version: “Wang Meng ‘Ni qishilu’ xiezuo zhongde xieni he ‘huangting de xiao’” 王蒙《拟启录》写作中的谐拟和《荒诞的笑》, *Hanyuyan wenxue yanjiu* (*Studies in Chinese Language and Literature*), 3, 2010, pp. 14 – 19.

<sup>2</sup> GÁLIK, M. In *Footsteps of the Inspector-General: Two Contemporary Chinese Plays*. In *Asian and African Studies*, pp. 64 – 80.

of a Communist Party, *Secret History of Karl Marx* was met with disapproval as a piece showing only a “good husband, good father and good friend”<sup>3</sup>, but not a great leader of the proletariat worthy of being followed. After it Sha Yexin wrote *Xunzhao nanzihan* 寻找男子汉 *In Search of a Good Man* about the experiences of a woman trying to find an ideal man in the milieu of the post-Mao period. It was also critically received at first, and it was only after the Secretary of the Shanghai Communist Party Committee declared, that this play *tu mou bu gui* 图谋不轨 did not hatch any sinister plots, that its critics shut up, and the play had two hundred runs.<sup>4</sup>

To write the *youmou xiju* 幽默喜剧 farcical comedy *Jesus, Confucius and John Lennon* was originally not his idea. His elder male cousin Wu Yiye 伍贻业 proposed to collaborate with him on a drama concerning Confucius, Jesus and Socrates. Because of different reasons this was not possible. Sha Yexin also did not proceed according to the original Wu Yiye’s scheme. At first it should be a one or two act play and after seven or eight years, in October 1987, it was finished as a four act play and its première was scheduled for September or October 1988.<sup>5</sup> I saw this play for the first time at its American première by the Harvard-Radcliffe Dramatic Club on May 11, 1990, directed by Leta Hong Fincher and performed in the Loeb Experimental Theatre at the American Repertory Theatre, 64 Brattle Street, Cambridge. It was the first day of the international conference “Contemporary Chinese Fiction and Its Literary Antecedents” which took place at the John King Fairbank Center for East Asian Research. The play has been translated by Alec Stockwell. In the introduction to the play the actors thank Sha Yexin for his support throughout the production of the play. This support was not specified. On the flyer we also find the words of Václav Havel from the acceptance speech for the Peace Prize of the German Booksellers’ Association in 1989: “I really do inhabit a system in which words are capable of shaking the entire structure of government...”, and of Mikhail Bakhtin from *Rabelais and His World: (Laughter) builds its own world versus the official world, its own church versus the official church, its own state versus the official state.*”

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Mikhail Bakhtin in his book about Rabelais had in mind laughter similar to the black humour so popular in the American literature of the last decades of the twentieth century, more or less in the same time known in China, too. Where the

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<sup>3</sup> SHA Yexin. Wode muhou yu. 我的墓后语 [My Words Beyond the Scene] In *Jesus, Confucius and John Lennon*. Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1989, p. 432.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 433.

<sup>5</sup> Loc. cit.

words by Bakhtin are concerned, they are applicable to some extent in contemporary China, but not the words of Havel. At least up to now, words only are not sufficient to bring changes. But in any case, they should be welcome. During our meeting with Sha Yexin in the Shanghai People's Art Theatre I wondered why he wrote precisely this play. I know that he was born into a Muslim family of the Hui 回 nationality and was educated in both the Muslim and Communist spirit. Why was Jesus and not Muhammad selected by him as God's "lieutenant" (in Stockwell's rendition) or *shizhe* 使者 – messenger or commissioner (in Sha Yexin's original) sent to this "dusty" world full of tears and suffering for many millions, or even hundreds of millions of people?! He answered my question with a pleasant smile and saying something like: you know why. Ayatollah Khomeini's *fatwā* from February 14, 1989 issued against Salman Rushdie for his *Satanic Verses* was well-known in China.

The heavenly assembly is an old mythical institution known since times immemorial. It existed already in ancient Sumer and we know it from Mesopotamia, Egypt, Babylon and Canaan. Often it is represented in a dramatic form(s) in the Babylonian myth *Enūma eliš* (*Epic of Creation*) where the fight between the god Marduk and goddess Tiamat is well delineated. The *dramatis personae* presenting the gods or goddesses were either the mythical beings or their statues and the living king(s) or highest priest(s). From the Near East, especially from Babylon, the idea of the heavenly assembly came into the Hebrew Bible where it has different traits due to the different characteristics of the monotheistic God who does not need to overcome other god(s) or goddess(es) as in the case of the Babylonian myth.<sup>6</sup> The heavenly assembly in the Bible represented, for instance, God with his angels and archangels who fought against His rebellious "children" and their "brothers".

In the Biblical *Apocalypse*, 12, 7 – 9 we read what allegedly happened *in illo tempore* in primeval times:

7 And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels

8 And prevailed not; neither was their place found anymore in Heaven.

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<sup>6</sup> LAMBERT, W. G., PARKER, S. B. *Enūma eliš. The Babylonian Epic of Creation. The Cuneiform Text*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966; THALON, P. *The Standard Babylonian Creation Myth Enūma Eliš. Introduction, Cuneiform Text, Transliteration, and Sign List with a translation and Glossary in French*. Vol. IV. Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Project, 2005; JACOBSEN, T. The Battle between Marduk and Tiamat. In *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, pp. 104 – 108.

9 And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.<sup>7</sup>

This kind of heavenly court has something to do with that which is to be found in Sha Yexin's drama. His work would be impossible without a creative confrontation with the Bible. The heavenly court to which I shall devote my musings, is not found in the *Apocalypse* from the New Testament, but in the *Book of Job* from the Hebrew Bible, that is from the Old Testament. This confrontation with the Hebrew Bible is probably the most frequent phenomenon among the works of contemporary Chinese literature. The works of this kind abound at the present time.

In the *Book of Job*, 2, 1 – 8 we read about the heavenly council with the most important message of God and his sons to mankind:

1 ... there was a day when sons of God come to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan came also among them to present himself before the LORD.

2 And the LORD said unto Satan, From whence comest thou? And Satan answered the LORD, and said, From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it.

3 And the LORD said unto Satan, Hast thou considered my servant Job, that *there is* not like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God and escheweth evil? And still he holdeth fast his integrity, although thou movedst me against him, to destroy him without cause.

4 And Satan answered the LORD, and said, Skin for skin, yea, all that a man hath will he give for his life.

5 But put forth thine hand now, and touch his bone and flesh, and he will curse thee to thy face.

6 And the LORD said unto Satan, Behold, he is in thine hand; but save his life.

7 So went Satan forth from the presence of the LORD, and smote Job with sore boils from the sole of his foot unto his crown.

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<sup>7</sup> In this study all the English renditions from the Bible are according to the *James King Version*.

8 And he took him a potsherd to scrape himself withal; and he sat down among the ashes.

This dialogue is put in another form creatively elaborated by Johann Wolfgang Goethe in the Prologue in Heaven to his *Faust*, Part One, where the Lord, the hosts of Heaven, with three Archangels and Mephistopheles are present. This prologue is the beginning of the *theatrum mundi* world theatre which is *Faust*, Part One and Part Two, but itself it is a *theatrum caeli* since it is performed in heaven. Dante's Paradiso from the *The Divine Comedy* is also a kind of *theatrum caeli* although it has not much in common with *Faust*. A well-known example of a *theatrum mundi* is the play *El grano teatro de mundi* (*The Great Theatre of the World*) by Pedro Calderón de la Barca (1600 – 1681) which highlights the idea of Shakespeare from his drama *As You Like It*: “All the world's play,/ and all the men and women merely players.” His actors: Beggar, Peasant, King and Rich Man were purely the humble servants of God and the examples of Christian virtues and the *theatrum caeli* both in *The Book of Job* and in *Faust* was quite different. In both of them we find the rebellious spirit, not only absolute obedience. We may see it in the words of Job in 13, 15: “Though he (God, M. G.) slay me, yet I will trust in him; but I will maintain mine own ways before him.” Mephistopheles tries to prevent Faust entering Heaven in the *theatrum mundi*, and in *theatrum caeli* Mephistopheles, alias Satan or the Devil, is the one who criticizes the Lord's last creations asserting in the verses 279 – 292:

Of suns and worlds I have nothing to be quoted;  
How men torment themselves, is all I have noted.  
The little god o' the world sticks to the same old way.  
And is as whimsical as on Creation's day.  
Life somewhat better might content him,  
But for the gleam of heavenly light which Thou hast  
lent him:  
He calls it Reason – thence his power's increased,  
To be far beastlier than any beast.  
Saving Thy Gracious Presence, he to me  
A long-legged grasshopper appears to be,  
That springing flies, and flying springs,

And in the grass the same old ditty sings.  
Would he still lay among the grass he grows in!  
Each bit of dung he seeks, to stick his nose in.<sup>8</sup>

Mephistopheles in Goethe's *Faust* is different from the ancient Satan of the *Book of Job*. He was a more courageous adversary of God than that from the Hebrew Bible. If Satan from the Old Testament fulfils the order of God to torment his innocent and faithful servant Job, Mephistopheles is not willing to do that. He feels compassion for the sufferings of human beings and he is not going to smite Job "with sore boils from the sole of his foot unto his crown" (2, 8). Mephistopheles replies to God: "Man's misery even to pity moves my nature; I've scarce the heart to plague the wretched creature."<sup>9</sup>

In Goethe's Prologue "die himmlischen Heersahren", the hosts of Heaven, God's "good sons", are represented by the three Archangels best known among Christians and mentioned in the Bible: Raphael, Gabriel and Michael. They all highlight the "perfection and incomprehensibility of God's worlds" which is an idea taken from the *Book of Job* (Chapters 38 – 42), but also from *Psalms* 111. It may also be compared with Dante's *Paradiso*, Canto 28, but it is not clear whether Goethe had it in mind when he put this eulogy into the mouths of the Archangels.<sup>10</sup> Even Archangels are not able to recognize fully the greatness of the Lord. For them the Cosmos, Sun, Stars are not only incomprehensible, but also splendid as in the first day of Creation. In the hardly expressible atmosphere of the moment induced by the Archangels, Mephistopheles enters the heavenly stage as a witness of this sublime show on the *theatrum caeli* and as an invited guest from the earth, not like in the times of Job. According to the verses 271 – 274 he addresses God, with the following words:

Since Thou, O Lord, deign'st to approach again  
And ask how we do, in manner kindest,  
And heretofore to meet myself wert fain,  
Among The menials, now, my face Thou findest.

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<sup>8</sup> In this study all translations from *Faust* are according to BAYARD, T. *Faust. A Tragedy. The First Act*. London: Strahan & Co. Publishers, 1871, reprinted by the Penn State Electronic Classics Series.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 14. Maybe Sha Yexin read these verses 297 – 298 in GUO Moruo's 郭沫若 (1982 – 1979) translation: Renlei de kuzhuang shi wo ailian, lian wo ye bu ken ba kuren zuojian 人类的状使我哀怜, 连我不肯把苦人作践 The bitter circumstances of mankind make me pitiful and I do not want to injure the suffering people. See, *Fushide* 浮士德 *Faust, Part One*. Shanghai: Xiandai shuju 1929, p. 23, or its post-1949 edition.

<sup>10</sup> ARENS, H. *Kommentar zu Goethe's Faust I*, p. 53.

His speech is anymore lofty. Like a fallen angel overcome by Michael and “cast out in the earth” (see above), he did not have the vision of Archangels. But he acquired the feelings of compassion for the tormented human beings in the world. The Lord in Goethe’s understanding did not change much. Just as in the *Book of Job*, He will probe one of His servants Dr. Faust. He is not fully satisfied with Faust, telling that he is still confused in his service to him (308) and He would appreciate, if he could follow the right path, even in spite of Mephistopheles’ temptations (312 – 314)

What will you bet? There’s still a chance to gain him,  
If unto me full leave you give,  
Gently upon *my* road to train him!

The same as in the *Book of Job* a *conditio sine qua non* is the following: “all that he hath *is* in thy power; only upon himself put not forth thy hand” (1, 12). As an adversary of God, or His “bad son”, Mephistopheles wanted to win Faust for his own purposes, for his own way of living, and he put it into practice in the *theatrum mundi*. He was not interested in tormenting Faust, but in leading him in his own way which was not always identical with that of the Lord. On the other hand the Lord was aware of the fallibility of human beings and was prepared to pardon them when it was possible. Famous are the words of verse 317: “Es irrt der Mensch so lang’ er strebt,” in Taylor’s rendition: “While Man’s desires and aspirations stir/ He cannot choose but err.”<sup>11</sup> The Lord of Goethe’s *Faust* acknowledges that a “good man, through obscurest aspiration (*dunklen Drange*)/ has still an instinct of the one true way” (328 – 329). He believes in Faust. And where is Mephistopheles concerned very important, although for many followers of God, the following confession from the verses 337 – 339 is beyond comprehension:

The like of thee have never moved My hate.  
Of old the bold, denying Spirits (*Geister die verneinen*),  
The waggish knave (*Schalk*) least trouble doth create.

God feels, of course, indebted to the human beings, and gives them “the comrade...who works, excites, and must create” – the Devil (342 – 343). And to the Hosts of Heaven, to “God’ sons in love and duty,” he recommends: “Enjoy

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<sup>11</sup> Here two verses are made from one. In the translation by WAYNE, Philipp , Penguin Books 1949, reprinted 1986, we find one verse: “For man must strive, and striving he must err” (p. 14).

the rich, the ever-living Beauty (der lebendig reichen Schöne)” of Heaven and of all worlds. (344 – 345)

Mephistopheles remains alone in Heaven after the Lord and his “good sons” left. He is not so respectful towards his Heavenly Father and calls him “der Alte”, translated too deferentially “Ancient” by Taylor and “Governor” by Wayne. Hans Arens characterizes it as “köstliche Nonchalance” (excellent negligence)<sup>12</sup> that in German is often used by the young in relation to older friends or superiors. Mephistopheles likes to hear His words from time to time, he avoids breaking his relations with the “grossen Herrn” (Great Lord) and regards it as “hübsch” civil (according to Taylor) or decent (according to Wayne), with him as Devil so humanly to gossip.

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It possible to agree with H. Arens once again when he claims that four verses (350 – 354) of the Prologue in Heaven’s end are a “capital joke”.<sup>13</sup> God speaks with the Devil in such a human way! In the verses before He admits that He never hated such a creature as him and that Mephistopheles may always come to visit Him in heaven: “Therein thou’rt free,” (Du darfst auch da nur frei erscheinen). (336) In the older manuscript of *Faust* this possibility is even more lucid and unambiguous: he may “auch künftig frei” (also in the future freely) pay visits to the Lord in Heaven.<sup>14</sup> Albrecht Schöne interprets the word “hübsch” in the last but one verse of the Prolog as in the old German: “höflich” (polite) and “liebenswertig” (kind-hearted). Arens’ “capital joke” he regards as “saucy contrasting impudences” (kess kontrastierenden Unverschämheiten) very different from the magnificent scenes preceding Mephistopheles’ last monologue and presenting thus its entertaining end.<sup>15</sup> Reiner Buchwald in his book analysing *Faust* characterizes the last four verses as a “scherzhaften Epigramme” (humorous epigram) and asserts that God only “duldet” (tolerates) Mephistopheles in His Heaven and in His World. I do not regard this view as a good analysis of the verses 336 – 339 and 342 – 343.<sup>16</sup>

Sha Yexin probably read Guo Moruo’s translation of *Faust*, since other translation of *Faust*. Part one was hardly accessible in China before the death of Guo Moruo in 1978. If we may believe his assertion mentioned presently Mr.

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<sup>12</sup> ARENS, H., op. cit., p. 68.

<sup>13</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>14</sup> GOETHE, J. W. von *Sämtliche Werke. Faust. Kommentare*, p. 175.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 178.

<sup>16</sup> BUCHWALD, R. *Führer durch Goethes Faustdichtung. Erklärung des Werkes und Geschichte seiner Entstehung*, p. 62.

Sha did not start to write *Jesus, Confucius and John Lennon* before 1980. The first full translation after the Cultural Revolution (1966 – 1976) was that of Qian Chunqi 钱春绮 published in 1982 by the Yiwén 译文 Publishing House in Shanghai. Qian Chunqi's translation was better, with many more notes contributing to understanding of this great work of World Literature, but without a scholarly introduction. Maybe, but this is my personal assumption, Sha Yexin had access to the best Chinese pre-1980s work on the life and work of Goethe by Zhang Yuechao 张月超 where the *Prologue on Heaven* is regarded as “the most important part” among the three pieces introducing *Faust*, because it “contains all the most important questions and meanings of the whole book” and there is just “Mephistopheles who as a literary character attracts most interest from the audience”. According to me, Zhang Yuechao's description of Mephistopheles is not exact in every point, but in his opinion Mephistopheles is a “denying spirit” who “doubts 怀疑 and derides (or jeers at) 譏笑 everything”.<sup>17</sup> There is no Mephistopheles in the Bible, he is a literary construct of the 16th century after about 1587.<sup>18</sup> Nobody may be quite sure what this name means and what is its origin. According to Arens, maybe, it was derived from Hebrew *mephir* which means destroyer, annihilator and *tophel* swindler, deceiver.<sup>19</sup> Goethe himself could not explain in a satisfactory way.<sup>20</sup>

The Mephistopheles of Goethe was not a destroyer or swindler. He was God's adversary, critic, he was a spirit that denies. He says to Faust in verses (1338 – 1344)

for all things, from the Void

Called forth, deserved to be destroyed:

‘T were better, then, were naught created.

<sup>17</sup> ZHANG Yuechao. *Gede pingzhuan* 歌德评传 [*Goethe's Life and Work*], p. 304.

<sup>18</sup> See *Historia von D. Johann Fausten, dem weitbeschreyten Zauberer und Schwarzkünstler... Gedruckt zu Franckfurt am Mayn, durch Johann Spiess, 1587* and *Ein wahrhaffte underschröckliche Geschicht von D. Johann Fausten, dem weitbeschreiten Zauberer und Schwarzkünstler... Getruckt zu Tübingen, bey Alexander hock, 1588.*

<sup>19</sup> ARENS, H., op. cit., p. 49; ERLER, G. in *Goethe Faust*, München: Wilhelm Goldmann Verlag 1978 uses *mephez* instead of *mephir*. According to the last, the name Mephistopheles was for the first time used in the *Faustbuch des Christlich Meynenden*. This one was published in 1725, see FRENZEL, E. *Stoffe der Weltliteratur. Ein Lexicon dichtungsgeschichtlicher Längschnitte*, p. 210. Before this date older forms of Mephistopheles were Mephistophiles, Mephostophileus and Mephostophiel.

<sup>20</sup> GOETHE, J. W. *Faust. Kommentare*, p. 167.

Thus, all which you as Sin have rated, -  
Destruction. – aught with Evil blent, -  
That is my proper element.

One more typical trait is characteristic for Mephistopheles. He says about himself in the verse 1336 that he is:

Part of that power, not understood,  
Which always wills the bad, and always works the Good.

This critical spirit in farcical manner typical for modern theatre, was one of the reasons that led Sha Yexin to a “transplantation” of Goethean Mephistopheles from the German classical stage into the Chinese theatre of the 1980s.

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Mephistopheles under Sha Yexin’s pen in the Chinese *theatro caeli* is, surprisingly enough: John Lennon (1940 – 1980). In Sha Yexin’s Heaven there is no time except its present form. He read in Saint Augustine’s Confessions the following about time as a philosophical concept in relation to God and history:

“Thou Thyself art supremely Essence and Life. *For Thou art most high, and art not changed*, neither in Thee doth To-day come to a close; yet in Thee doth it come to a close; because all such things also are in Thee. For they had no way to pass away, unless Thou upheldest them. And since *Thy years fail not*, Thy years are one To-day.”<sup>21</sup>

Another possible text as a springboard for Sha Yexin’s quotation:

“... it might be probably said, “there be three times; a present of things past, a present of things present and present of things future.”<sup>22</sup>

The most important is always To-day, the present. Through the present we may understand the past and expect the future. As Sha Yexin asserts, thanks to Saint Augustine’s philosophy of time, he understood the meaning of the present in the years during which he wrote the play. He even promised to become a

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*. Transl. by Edward Bouverie Pusey. New York: Quality Paperback Book Club 1991, p. 7 and in SHA Yexin. *Jesus, Confucius and John Lennon*, p. 343.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 292 and p. 343.

Christian after finishing of it, which was probably meant as a joke.<sup>23</sup> Although this philosophy of time is subjectivist it helped him to believe that what went on during the years he wrote the play, will continue and find its new realization in the near future. The present time is a part of what is already gone and of what will come. The 1980s were extremely important in the history of mankind, in China, and in a great part of the world. They were “pregnant” (in Marxist parlance) with the events that came at their end in China and in nearly the whole upper part of Europe and Asia in 1989.<sup>24</sup> Similarly to the *theatrum caeli* and *theatrum mundi* in *Faust*, where the second half of the 18th and first half of the 19th century was put on the stage, Sha Yexin’s play tried to present, although in a different manner, the fictional world of at least part of the 20th century. The Heavenly court in Sha Yexin’s play is located in the Christian “Heavenly Jerusalem”. He took over the description of its grandeur from the *Apocalypse*, 21, 10 – 22. Because as a living person he never had an occasion to see it, he quotes the situation within its walls with “twelve foundations” (named after twelve apostles of Jesus Christ, 21, 14) according to the description by John in the verses 21, 2 – 3:

2 And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

3 And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God *is* with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, *and be* their God.

We already find a farcical description in the first scene of the play. John’s *Apocalypse* provided a good specimen for his vision with exclusion of the heavenly music. The “great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations,” (*Apocalypse*, 7, 9) in white robes having the palm branches in their hands are waiting for God and Jesus coming to the morning veneration. Among them are the great personalities of humankind of all ages starting with Archimedes (287 – 212 B.C.) and ending with the Japanese Meiji Emperor (1868 – 1912). From the Chinese Qin shihuang Emperor 秦始皇帝 (221 – 209 B.C.) is mentioned as the first and Cao Xueqin (ca. 1724 – 1764) with Li Shizhen 李时珍 (1518 – 1598) as the last. They are the new Hosts of Heaven very different from those of the Prologue in Heaven with three Archangels reciting their odes on all creations of the Lord. The “new Hosts” are silent at first. They are too many since the times of creation of the first man on the sixth day in

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<sup>23</sup> SHA Yexin, loc. cit.

<sup>24</sup> Tiananmen Incident in China on June 3 – 4 and the fall of Communism in European countries before the Christmas of that year and a new situation in the Soviet Union that led to the same end in 1991.

the Lord's own image and after His likeness (cf. *Genesis, 1, 26*). Galileo Galilei observes them with his telescope. He is nervous because of long waiting. He asks what time it is To-day. At first he puts this question to Ludwig van Beethoven who is deaf and therefore he does not answer. Then he tries Albert Einstein who was "the most ingenious and most worthy of admiration"<sup>25</sup> human being of the 20th century. The result is the same as with van Beethoven. Einstein came to Heaven brainless after the autopsy conducted on him by the American pathologist Thomas Stoltz Harvey (1912 – 2007) on April 18, 1955. Einstein's brain was never returned to him which is a pity. It could be very useful for the Heaven of To-day where there are so many difficulties. Let us say, because of the environment and water pollution. Originally a "pure water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb (Jesus Christ, M. G.)" and the trees of life "for the healing of nations" (*Apocalypse, 22, 2 – 3*) were "to some extent polluted".<sup>26</sup> In China at the time of writing this play China not only had problems with the natural environment, but also with "spiritual pollution", especially in the year 1983.<sup>27</sup> After waiting for a long time God and Jesus came from the tennis court and the Lord greeted the masses of the saints with the words: "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending...which is, which was, and which is to come, the Almighty." (*Apocalypse, 1, 8*). All the souls responded with a prayer, which in Sha Yexin's wording was a longer paraphrase of the *Apocalypse, 7, 12*: "...Blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving and honour, and power, and might, *be* unto our God for ever and ever. Amen."<sup>28</sup>

After the morning prayer the "Heavenly Host" did not leave the stage, but repeated earlier petitions for the full rehabilitation of Galilei and for the return of Einstein's brain back to him. Both God and Jesus were reluctant to hear and to stay, since the morning weather was "hot and muggy" and "God's decided to spend a month at a resort."<sup>29</sup> God was completely exhausted due to the difficulties in Heaven in spite of the promises given in the *Apocalypse, 7, 16 – 17* that its inhabitants:

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<sup>25</sup> SHA Yexin, op. cit., p. 346.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 344.

<sup>27</sup> See LARSON, W. Realism, Modernism, and the Anti-'Spiritual Pollution' Campaign in China. In *Modern China*, pp. 37 – 71. Prof. Larson mentions Gao Xingjian 高行建, Li Tuo 李陀, Zhang Xinxin 张辛欣, Dai Houying 戴厚英, Peng Ning 彭宁 and Bai Hua 白桦, who were the victim of the attack. Cf. also GOLD, T. B. "Just in Time!" China Battles Spiritual Pollution on the Eve of 1984. In *Asian Survey*, 24, 9, September 1984.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. SHA Yexin, op. cit., pp. 347 – 348.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 348 and Alec Stockwell's translation in the *Renditions*, 43, Spring 1995, p. 5.

16 They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat.

17 For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.

Allegedly there were the conflicts between the heavenly artists from Giotto and Rafael up to Cezanne who would paint the Holy Mother and Goya punched Michelangelo and bloodied his nose. Bach, Chopin and Liszt also quarrelled over who would compose a holy hymn. Since the 1960s living human beings from the earth have started to invade Heaven. Armstrong, said Jesus, “piloted Apollo to the Moon, which is a part of Heaven”<sup>30</sup>, planted there the American flag, stole moon rock and soil, expelled two moon goddesses Diana and Chang E 嫦娥 from their realm and then they came to us asking for asylum. Since Heaven is relatively small, according to the Greek text of *Apocalypse*, 21, 17 it is a four-square cube of 12,000 furlongs, that is 2,400 kilometres,<sup>31</sup> there is no place for the homeless. In that moment, a spaceship flies over Heaven and the cosmonauts throw out a container with gnawed apples on the crowd and Jesus becomes angry that the terrestrials are making a garbage dump out of “that great city the holy Jerusalem” (*Apocalypse*, 21, 10).

After all that a frightened old man appears among the participants of the Heavenly court splattered with rotten eggs. He reports that he was just sitting in the Xingtan 杏坛 Apricose Altar, school in Qufu 曲阜 discussing the problems concerned with the Dao 道 Way with his seventy-two disciples, when an unruly mob from Purgatory *pai shan dao hai* 排山倒海 started to demonstrate overthrowing the mountains and upsetting the seas. Their leaders were President John Fitzgerald Kennedy and his girl friend *xinggan yingxing* 性感影星 sexbomb Marilyn Monroe. “They were holding their hands, was it *titong* 体统 proper and decent?”<sup>32</sup> – said the scared old Chinese. It was Confucius, one of the greatest philosophers in world history. Allegedly from 20,000 up to 100,000 people came to disturb him and his disciples. These, could, of course, only be Chinese and Purgatory was the People’s Republic of China during the *Pi Lin pi Kong* 批林批孔 Criticize Lin Biao and Confucius Campaign (1973 – 1974).<sup>33</sup> If

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<sup>30</sup> SHA Yexin, op. cit., p. 349.

<sup>31</sup> See *Good News Bible. Today’s English Version*. 4th ed. Glasgow: William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd., 1976, p. 32. SHA Yexin, op. cit., mentions 15 English miles, p. 343.

<sup>32</sup> SHA Yexin, op. cit., p. 352.

<sup>33</sup> ANON. Den Kampf zur Kritik an Lin Piao und Konfuzius bis zum Ende führen. In *Peking Rundschau*, pp. 5 – 8 and MacFARQUHAR, R., SCHOENHALS, M. *Mao’s Last Revolution*, Cambridge (Mass.), Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2006. For the harsh criticism of Confucius by the Chinese philosophers and other Maoists see

the leaders were Kennedy and Monroe, and the participants the well-known politicians, writers, artists, actors of the 20th century from different parts of the world, with the exception of Mao Zedong and of Bruce Lee (1940 – 1973), Chinese American actor, martial instructor and film director, we may conclude, that not including other modern Chinese among the demonstrators was a hidden manoeuvre of the author not to be accused of misunderstanding modern and contemporary Chinese history. Mao Zedong was in Purgatory because he was a “must” of Chinese reality during his life and even after his death. Confucius also reported that among them is also a hermaphrodite with a “big ham on his back”.<sup>34</sup>

The hermaphrodite for the representatives of Heavenly assembly was John Lennon with seemingly women’s clothes and long hair. His guitar looked to Confucius like a big ham, since he was accustomed to be paid by a bundle of dried meat for his teaching.<sup>35</sup> For Sha Yexin John Lennon was a new modern or modernist Mephistopheles, a self-confident, serious, joking, provoking critic of all which seemed to him false, but also trying to understand those who had other opinions, views, or even beliefs. His self-confidence was sometimes exaggerated when he said in front of God: “I am more popular than Jesus Christ!” or when he tried to persuade the inhabitants of the Heaven or its intruders in that moment about the artistic value of his song:

Imagine there’s no heaven it’s easy if you try  
No hell below us above us only sky  
Imagine all the people living for today  
Imagine there’s no country it isn’t hard to do  
Nothing to kill or die for and no religion, too  
Imagine all the people living life in peace

You may say I’m a dreamer but I’m not the only one  
I hope someday you’ll join us and the world will be as one

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YANG Rongguo 杨荣国 *et alii*: *Pi Lin pi Kong wenzhang huibian* 批林批孔文章汇编 色 *Selected Articles Criticizing Lin Piao and Confucius*. Peking: People’s Publishing House 1974.

<sup>34</sup> SHA Yexin, *op. cit.*, p. 352.

Imagine no possession I wonder if we can  
No need for greed no hunger a brotherhood of man  
Imagine all the people sharing all the world.

You may say I'm a dreamer but I'm not the only one  
I hope someday you'll join us  
And the world will live as one<sup>36</sup>

If in Goethe's *Prologue in Heaven*, only the last four verses were a modification of Bakhtin's laughter. In the Heavenly Assembly of Sha Yexin the whole of one act is dedicated to the comic situations where John Lennon acts as a spokesman for those who are not satisfied in Purgatory.

Sha Yexin might be influenced by Nasreddin Hodja's 27 anecdotes which appeared in the journal *Minjian wenxue* 民间文学 *Folklore Literature*, Vol. 1, January 1956, or by Wang Meng's Maimati chuzhang yishi. Weiwuerren de "heise youmo" 买买提处长轶事。维吾尔人的“黑色幽默” [Anecdotes of Chairman Maimaiti. "Uygurian Black Humour"], in *Wang Meng xiaoshuo baogaowenxuexuan* 王蒙小说报告文学选 [Wang Meng's Short Stories and Reportages] (1981). The impact of the American "black humour" works is likewise possible since in the 1980s translations of these works started to appear in the PRC. For some readers the parts of Joseph Heller's (1923 – 1999) *Catch-22* and *Something Happened* were accessible already in August 1976 as materials for "internal use" of the cadres of the CCP and of the state.<sup>37</sup> Another impulse for writing the first act of the play under review might be the burlesque and carnivalesque chapters Five to Seven of Wu Cheng'en' 吴承恩 (ca. 500 – 1582) novel *Xiyou ji* 西游记 *Journey to the West* amalgamating the folk and popular Buddho-Taoist religious ideas and beliefs in the character of Sun Wukong 孙悟空, which may be translated as Sun Awakened to Emptiness.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> *Lun yu* 论语 *Confucius. The Analects*, pp. 57 – 58.

<sup>36</sup> The text available at <http://www.beatles.ws/john.htm>. In Stockwell's translation of the Act I of Sha Yexin's play reprinted in *Renditions*, 43, Spring 1995, p. 9 we find that only the beginning of the first stanza is reproduced, and the words of God: "That's enough" are not meant that God does not want to hear Lennon's song, but they are protesting against Lennon's boasting that he is more popular than Jesus.

<sup>37</sup> Available at <http://www.chinavalue/bookinfo/Bookinfo.aspx?Bookid=217291>.

<sup>38</sup> Sun 孙 is a Chinese surname, but *sun* 狻 is a part of *husun* 狻狻, macaque, a kind of monkey. W. J. E. Jenner translates Sun Wukong in the *Journey to the West*. Vol. 1, Peking: Foreign Languages Press 1990, p. 22 as Monkey Awakened to Emptiness. Sun Wukong has got quite a few names and titles in the novel. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sun\\_Wukong](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sun_Wukong).

Under his title Qi tian da sheng 齊天大聖 Great Sage Equalling Heaven, this “mere monkey devil”<sup>39</sup> was not invited to participate at a banquet arranged by the Queen Mother of the Jade Pool and therefore he stole nearly all the fruits of the Peach Orchard and made the banquet impossible. He made himself an enemy of all in the Buddho-Taoist Heaven<sup>40</sup> and fought against all, always victorious with his miraculous massive cudgel, until he was pacified by the Buddha’s almighty hand.<sup>41</sup> Sun Wukong, according to the text of Wu Cheng’en was a “rebel against Heaven, wanting a high position, insulted immortals... and destroyed morality”, he was punished, but because of the “roots of goodness”<sup>42</sup> in his character, he was pardoned at the end, and he helped later Tripitaka Sanzang 三藏, or Xuanzang 玄奘 (ca. 600 – 664) to bring the sacred books of Buddhism to China.

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There is a great difference between Sun Wukong and John Lennon. Sun Wukong had been offended by heavenly authorities and his reaction was the revolt against Heaven and with his magic cudgel he caused havoc in Heaven incomparable to the descriptions even in the most satirical works of European literature. John Lennon in Sha Yexin’s play came to visit God together with poor souls from China and from the other parts of the world as their spokesman asking for forgiveness and acceptance into Heaven. The comical situation which arose after the inhabitants of Purgatory met God and His Son, was an outcome of a misunderstanding. Sun Wukong fought with his iron cudgel and “little monkeys” enabling him to defeat the whole armies of Celestials. John Lennon fought only with his guitar, his song and arguments. He was misunderstood at first as a hermaphrodite, then as a smoker of acid and musician. Amadeus Mozart said that his song was *jietou jiahuazi de haojiao* 街头叫花子的嚎叫 worse than two tom-cats on the prowl.<sup>43</sup> God told him that to use drugs is a crime, that demonstrations are bad, Jesus reminded him of overpopulation in Heaven, traffic jams, unemployment, food shortages. Lennon addressed both, that Heaven should be more democratic than earth, and to Jesus his words from *Luke, 10, 9*: “The kingdom of God is come nigh to you...”, and from *Luke, 11, 9*:

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 78 and WU Cheng’en. *Xiyou j.*, Vol. 1., p. 48.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Reply to Comrade Guo Moruo (Nov. 17, 1961). *Mao Zedong Poems*, n.p., Open Source Socialist Publishing 2008, p. 39. Mao was a great admirer of Sun Wukong’s “miracles”.

<sup>41</sup> *Journey to the West*. Vol. 1, p. 124 and *Xiyou ji*, Vol. 1, p. 74.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., pp. 131 and 77.

<sup>43</sup> See SHA Yexin, op. cit., p. 355 and *Renditions*, p. 9.

“Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.” Jesus contradicted him with the words from *John*, 8, 47: “He that is of God heareth God’s word.” Lennon did not want to retreat. All the souls banged the door of Heaven and wanted to enter. The scared but wise Confucius was for a refined “diplomacy” when he repeated his words from *The Analects*, 15, 27: “...the lack of self-restraint in small matters will bring ruin to great plans.”<sup>44</sup> Immediately after, in front of Heaven’s gate the heated shouts of the inhabitants of Purgatory were heard. Among them: *Ziyou wan sui* 自由万岁 Long live freedom.<sup>45</sup> Jesus modified the first half of *Psalms*, 46, 6th verse of *Psalms*, 66 and 7th verse of *Psalms*, 18,<sup>46</sup> but God became angry and declared that if the demonstrations and rebellions will not cease, He will punish all demonstrators and sinful mankind upon the earth as he did during the 40 days and nights of the Deluge. Lennon reached for *Genesis*, 10, and asked the demonstrators to follow with him the 11th verse:

11 And I will establish my covenant with you; neither shall all flesh be cut off anymore by the waters of a flood; neither shall there any more be a flood to destroy the earth.

Then Lennon asked all to read together verses 15 and 16:

15 ...I will remember my covenant, which *is* between and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh.

16 And the bow shall be in the cloud; and I will look upon it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that *is* upon the earth.

In the same moment a rainbow appeared. God took back his threat against the demonstrators. They started to chant a hymn of praise in imitation of *Psalms*, 57, 10, 71, 5, 36, 6 and *The Proverbs*, 3, 19.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> *Confucius. The Analects (Lun yü)*. Transl. by D. C. Lau, pp. 154 – 155.

<sup>45</sup> SHA Yexin, op. cit., p. 359. The same slogan shouted later on the demonstration of some hundred thousand of people on Tiananmen on May 13, 1989. See *Summary of World Broadcasts, Part 3, Far East*, May 25, 1989. Taken over from CREMERIUS, R. et alii: *Studentenprotest und Repression in China April – Juni 1989. Analyse, Chronologie, Dokumente*, p. 273.

<sup>46</sup> SHA Yexin, loc. cit.

<sup>47</sup> SHA Yexin, op. cit., pp. 362 – 363.

The first verse of the praise “Your mercy reaches the Heaven” is a paraphrase of “For thy mercy *is* great unto the heavens, and thy truth unto the clouds.”

The second verse “Our trust in You touches the vault of Heaven” follows “For thou *art* my hope, O LORD GOD: *thou art* my trust from my youth.”

The third verse “Your righteousness is like the high mountains” imitates “Thy righteousness *is* like the great mountains; ...”

The fourth verse “Your wisdom is like a sea” modifies “The LORD by wisdom hath founded the earth; by understanding hath he established the heavens.”

Not even three months after the publication of this play by Sha Yexin on Tiananmen’s *theatrum mundi* no rainbow appeared in the sky, but in the early morning of June 4, 1989 thousands of students and other demonstrators did not see the rainbow above in the sky but they became the targets of projectiles of the tanks and soldiers of the PLA, and many of them died there.

Evidently God was not fully satisfied with pardoning the demonstrators from Purgatory and not at all with the situation in the contemporary world. He understood that only his mercy and forgiveness for his children on the blue planet is not enough. He decided to send an observation team of three commissioners to *kaocha* 考察 to search into the *zuiwu* 罪恶 evils, crimes on the earth in order to 拯救 save its souls. Confucius was the first who was eager to participate. He proclaimed: “Public duty admits of no excuse. I shall take over this responsibility.” And then: “I am the sort of man who forgets to eat when trying to solve a problem that has been driving me to distraction. I am full of joy that I forget my worries and I do not notice the onset of old age.”<sup>48</sup> The second who expressed the desire to join was Jesus. God disagreed at first since it could be regarded as a sort of nepotism. Confucius helped to persuade God in favour of Jesus. Allegedly *ren yan bu zu wei* 人言不足畏 it is not to be afraid of human words,<sup>49</sup> but to recommend *ju xian* 举贤 worthy men regardless of the family connection. Jesus as a good son was happy that he could follow his own prayer he taught his disciples and all Christians: “Thy will be done in earth, as it is in

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<sup>48</sup> Cf. SHA Yexin, op. cit., p. 363 and D. C. Lau’s translation of the *Analects*, 7, 19, pp. 60 – 61.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. the translation of the last words of the song *Jiang Zhong zi* 将仲子 from *Shijing* 诗经 *The Book of Poetry*, in *The Chinese Classics*. Transl. by James Legge. Vol. 4, Taipei: Jinxue shuju 1969, p. 126.

heaven.” (*Matthew*, 6, 10.) At first he protested against God’s will to send John Lennon as the third commissioner, since he was an organizer of the forbidden demonstration. God highlighted Lennon’s intelligence and especially his ability to organize this kind of action very important in the world of mortals in our days. Confucius was most enthusiastic to go and to fulfil the mission: “*Jun ming zhao, bu si jia xing* 君命召，不俟驾行 if summoned by the Lord, I would set off without waiting for horses to be yoked to the carriage.”<sup>50</sup>

The three commissioners of God quickly hurried to fulfil God’s mission. The trio of Heavenly commissioners reminds the researcher in the Bible and in modern literature of the story of three angels sent by God to Abraham to inform him that his wife Sarah, at that time too old to beget a child, “shall have a son” (*Genesis*, 18, 10). Sha Yexin read *Genesis* as we have shown presently. He was certainly very well acquainted with Bertolt Brecht’s drama *The Good Person of Sezuan* where three gods from Heaven are searching for a good man and woman who could help to reform the sinful life of the inhabitants of the world.<sup>51</sup>

The following acts Two, Three and Four of Sha Yexin’s play are concerned with the journey of the three heavenly messengers to the moon and to the earth. This is beyond the scope of the present research.

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<sup>50</sup> D. C. Lau’s translation, pp. 92 – 93.

<sup>51</sup> More about B. Brecht and Sha Yexin see HSIA, Adrian. “The Brechtian Drama of Sha Yexin.” *Comparative Literature Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 4, 1993, pp. 405 – 422 and LUK, Thomas Y. T. “From Brecht, Artaud, and the Absurd to Sha Yexin and Gao Xingjian: Two Cases of *Rapport de Fait*.” *Ibid.*, Vol. 48, No. 1, 2011, pp. 64 – 81.

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