

A Word for the Impostor

—introducing the drama of Sha Yexin

By Geremie Barmé

IN JULY 1979, a short farce written by students of Fudan University called *Son of the 'Artillery Commander'* '炮兵司令'の兒子 was staged in Shanghai.¹ Although basically a comedy of errors, there was one element of the play that assured its immediate popular success and even earned it first prize in a Shanghai drama competition:² the story hinged on a lowly youth impersonating the son of a high level army official.

The play holds an old party cadre up to ridicule and much is made of the obsequious fawning he displays in front of the 'commander's son'. The story would have appeared forced and unlikely if it had not been for the arrest of a youth by the name of Zhang Longquan for fraud some time earlier. Zhang had impersonated the son of 'Li Da, Deputy Chief of Staff of the PLA, for some months, and by the time this play was produced the impostor had taken on the aspect of a minor folk hero. Zhang had originally struck on the idea of pretending to be the son of an official after being frustrated in his attempts to get a ticket to see a highly popular production of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. The ease with which the 'back door' of the theatre and Shanghai high society opened for him as a result of this simple ruse emboldened him to continue the deception. Starting off in late 1978 as a mere farm-hand, an 'unreturned' countryside youth from Chongming Island, by the Spring Festival of 1979 Zhang had been accepted by the upper crust of Shanghai society and had the run of the city. His slick and winsome ways won him fame and widespread popular credence; stories of this luminary from the north even took precedence over other local gossip for a time. It was only when his neighbours reported him, suspicious of his comings and goings at all hours of the day and night in a chauffeured limousine, that an investigation was finally undertaken and the deception uncovered.³

¹See *Eastern Horizon* (Hong Kong), Vol. 18, No. 10, 1979, pp. 39-48, *Son of the 'Artillery Commander'*, translated by Geremie Barmé; also Takashima Tadao's *Koe naki tokoro ni kyōrai o kiku* 聲無き所に驚雷を聴く, Tokyo 1981, pp. 83-9.

²*Wenhuibao* 文匯報 (Shanghai), July 3, 1979.

³See *Zhengming* 爭鳴, August 1979, pp. 22-4, and *The Seventies* 七十年代, January 1980, pp. 74-5.

Zhang Longquan had unwittingly become the son of Li Da, the PLA commander; following his arrest he went on to receive popular fame and recognition as the protagonist in a number of short stories and plays. Shanghai audiences seemed to have an insatiable appetite for new plays in 1979, and not long after *Son of the Artillery Commander* was staged, another play with a similar theme appeared. It was called *If I Were Real* (假如我是真的, referred to by its other name *The Impostor* 騙子 hereafter). Written by three young Shanghainese—Sha Yexin 沙葉新, Li Shoucheng 李守成 and Yao Mingde 姚明德—from the Shanghai Drama Company,⁴ the play was only allowed restricted exhibition due to its controversial representation of the impostor (Li Xiaozhang 李小璋) and the various cadres who appear. By the end of the year it was something of a *cause célèbre*, and the question of whether it should be performed publicly or not eventually required the intervention of the then Director of Propaganda of the CPC, Hu Yaobang.

Before continuing this study of the fate of *The Impostor* and its main author, Sha Yexin, it might be appropriate to consider the comments made by Ba Jin on the subject. Ba Jin, a famed veteran writer and long-time resident of Shanghai, is the most publicly outspoken writer of his age. Through his “literary bequest” *Random Thoughts* 隨想錄, a series of casual essays that range from reflections on the past to pointed political comment, Ba Jin has become the conscience of a generation, and since 1978 he has been a central figure in all of the major cultural debates. In his article “The Little Impostor” 小騙子, written on 29 September, 1979, during a bout of illness he tells us something of the relevance and impact of not only the impostor, but the play written about him:—

A few months back a little impostor was unmasked. Prior to his being found out a number of people really had been taken in: they had all heard he was the son of a high-level cadre in the Army. Once he had been arrested there was much wringing of hands; some people overreacted, while there were those who took it all as a great joke. The city was full of stories about the incident, so much so in fact that two Shanghai dailies eventually reported it in full. Even some Hong Kong journals printed articles about it. (Naturally, neither these reports nor articles necessarily correspond completely with the truth.) Certain people had been made to look like fools; there were those who were delighted and others still who were furious. All in all, it was cause for considerable popular discussion.

Subsequently a drama company put on a play about the little impostor. It has only been shown to limited audiences because there are conflicting views about it, and there is definite opposition to

⁴For background to the writing of the play refer to Sha Yexin's article ‘Concerning *If I Were Real*’ 關於《假如我是真的》, *Shanghai Drama* 上海戲劇, June 1980, p. 2. An interesting criticism of *The Impostor* can be found in Yuan Shaojie's 袁少傑 “Looking at the writing of satirical drama by a comparison of three plays about impostors” 從三個騙子劇的比較中看諷刺劇的創作, *Journal of Dandong Teachers' College*

丹東師專學報, January 1982, pp. 22-32, in which the author studies the influence of Gogol's play on Chen Baichen's 陳白塵 *Bureaucrats' Snakes and Ladders* 陸官圖, Lao She's *Looking West to Chang'an* 西望長安, and Sha's *The Impostor*. In the body of this article the writer makes a detailed and fairly damning critique of Sha's play.

making it public. Some say that the writers sympathize with the little impostor, and there's also the opinion that the play denigrates older cadres.

I haven't seen the play so, naturally, I can't comment. For that matter I've never met the impostor either, although I heard about him, starting from when he was being treated like the 'son of a high-level cadre'. The talk continued right up to his arrest, and it's still going on now. Rumour has it that after he was arrested he said, 'My only crime is that I am not the son of So-and-so.' He is also supposed to have asked, 'What would have happened if I were really So-and-so's son?' I believe that sympathizers have offered to act as his defence counsel in court. Needless to say, all of the above is hearsay and therefore not particularly reliable. Although I haven't heard of anyone expressing concern for those who were taken in—the general comment is that 'they only got what they deserved'—there definitely are people who pity the impostor. As for me, I have greater sympathy for the victims. This incident is not a comedy, it's a tragedy, and it is established social practice (社會風氣) that should be coming under fire. 'I'm just doing what everyone else does. It's just my bad luck to have been caught out by a phoney.'

I can't help thinking of the play the Russian writer Gogol created 143 years ago, *The Government Inspector*. The mere mention of this 19th century Russian writer still gives people a headache. Worst of all is that this particular writer hits us just where it hurts. I know there are those who will disagree with this and who will argue: Gogol attacks the feudal society of Russia, it has absolutely nothing to do with our own 'beautiful socialist society'. They are right, of course; there is no connection. Furthermore, that 143-year-old cheat and our impostor have nothing in common. Yet that is just why it is all so odd, because in both cases the reason that so many people were attracted to the impostors was exactly the same: it was for personal gain. Why, they both nearly even got wives out of their masquerade. The only difference between them is that Gogol's impostor was smarter, he managed to escape to distant parts and even had the satisfaction of deriding his victims in a letter to a friend. Our little impostor, on the other hand, has been arrested and is in gaol awaiting trial. Even so, he is by no means a fool because he has posed us a question that demands careful thought: 'What would have happened if I really were So-and-so's son?' It is a problem to which I have devoted much thought, and I must admit, my conclusion is that if he had been So-and-so's son then nothing would have come of it. Everything would have been peaches and cream and the story would have had a happy ending. All the meals, the free shows, the car he was given to use, the girlfriend he had been introduced to He could have gone on to select a beautiful woman to be his bride, then he could have arranged to have her transferred to a better job, and so on and so on. It would all have been perfectly all right. He could even have gone on an overseas junket, and enjoyed so many, many In a word, all of the crimes that the little impostor has been accused of would have been legitimate and quite acceptable. There would be no newspaper reports or plays about him, no conflict

over whether the play should be performed publicly or not. In actual fact, this type of thing has been going on since ancient times, everyone takes it for granted, nothing strange in it at all. But WHY does it continue?

The sentence uttered by the little impostor has disturbed my dreams for months. But there's another question that haunts me as well: 'How could all of those experienced people fall so willingly into his trap?' The more I think about it the more depressed I become, for I have to admit to myself that there are still backward aspects of our society, even things that Gogol attacked back in 1836. Despite the fact that over the last three years we have constantly been told that 'mal-practices involving backdoorism' are to be corrected, the back door is opening wider all the time. If you can't see or even find a front door when you have to get something done, even something as simple as repairing a broken window which in the normal course of events takes ages, naturally you are going to think of finding a back door. It's not surprising then that people make fools of themselves when they inadvertently get involved with an impostor. Why can't our *yamen* open up their front doors and do a little more for the people? Why don't certain cadres pay more attention to the people below them instead of always thinking of their superiors?

Reverting to the question of whether the play should be staged for the general public, I can only repeat that I have no right to comment. However, as to those who are of the opinion that the play blackens the image of cadres and socialism, I would say that this is not necessarily so. Shanghai is not the only city in which an impostor has appeared, it has happened in other provinces. Is his appearance a freak? He would never have come into being if there wasn't the proper soil and climate for his 'growth'. If he had not been able to take advantage of the peculiarities of our society then no one would have been taken in. It is only proper that he was uncovered and roundly condemned, as that is all part and parcel of ridding the society of the 'climatic conditions' and soil which gave him life.

If this illness is not attended to, if this sore is not given treatment and the back door is constantly opened and the use of position and so on is made into the 'ideal'; if the old feudal belief that one 'can't wash one's dirty linen in public' is approved of as a motto in our social and political life thereby disallowing people to touch any sore spots, then in the long run you won't just be blackening the face of socialism, you end up undermining its very foundations.⁵

Ba Jin's attitude to the play has remained unequivocal: he has supported the public staging of *The Impostor* since 1979. However, during the Fourth All-China Congress of Writers and Artists held in Peking at the end of that year, *The Impostor* along with a number of similar works that were construed as being critical of older cadres and sympathetic towards youthful criminals became the object of heated debate. *The Impostor* was staged a number of times during the congress for the

⁵From *Searching* 探索集, volume two of *Random Thoughts*, by Ba Jin, Beijing 1981, pp. 4-7.

convenience of the delegates, but no overall consensus as to just how the questions it raised should be treated in the arts was reached. Concerned by the lack of unanimity in what was the first major cultural gathering since before the Cultural Revolution, another meeting was organized for January 1980, when the play was again the object of considerable attention.⁶ Although organized in the name of the Dramatists', Film-makers' and Writers' Associations, the meeting reached a climax when Hu Yaobang made a lengthy speech which has since acquired the status of a major policy statement on culture. In it he prefaces his comments on *The Impostor* and like works with the words:

We must pay attention to the following points:

1. It is vital that an isolated phenomenon should not be made into artistic reality. Artistic reality should be based on real types (典型) and essential reality;
2. Something that is no more than a transient phenomenon should not be represented as an immutable and unchanging reality. [Writing] should reflect the dialectic of historical development.

It is my feeling that our socialist authors should keep these [points] in mind regardless of whether they write tragedies or comedies; or whether their works show positive or negative [aspects of society]. They will only produce works that can achieve some degree of success if they write like this.⁷

After a few prefatory remarks about Gogol's *The Government Inspector* and the nature of the society it criticized, Hu directed a number of fairly withering comments at *The Impostor* and the play's authors:—

Which of the works that have appeared in the last three years then are to be found lacking, unsuccessful and negative in their social effect? I haven't read a great deal, so I'll have to ask you to reflect on this question yourselves. Two months ago I flicked through *If I Were Real*, and made a few comments on it at a meeting. Today, in the presence of the authors and you other comrades, I'd like to repeat [those comments], and lay my heart bare before you. If you think I'm right, I still hope you'll discuss [what I say]; if I'm wrong, then I welcome your criticisms.

In my opinion, the writers [of the play] are talented and they have a future ahead of them. In dealing with problems involving young writers we must not repeat the errors of the past: we should not disparage them or attack them. In this context I made some mistakes when dealing with young writers before the 'Great Cultural Revolution'. The comrades in question were talented but their works were

⁶See 'Précis of the Proceedings at the Symposium on Scenario- and Play-writing' 劇本創作座談會情況簡述, *Wenyibao* 文藝報, April 1980, pp. 2-8; *Zhengming*, April 1980, p. 56; *The Seventies*, June 1980, pp. 84-5; and, *Shanghai Drama*, January 1981, pp. 2-5.

⁷The full text of this speech was made public in the first issue of *Wenyibao* 1981, pp. 2-20. For this quotation, see pp. 12-3.

lacking in maturity; they needed our help, but our policy towards them was incorrect. But, now they are back again and are accomplished writers. If any of those middle-aged writers was to say in one of their works that 'the old goat So-and-so made an error in dealing with my case', I would approve because that's the truth.

As I see it, *If I Were Real* is not a mature work; it contains some serious defects. I might be wrong, however. Now, what do I mean when I say it is not a mature work? First and most importantly, I feel that the characters that form the human scenery of the work give a [collective] impression [of the society] since the Third Plenum that is neither sufficiently real nor typical. At the end [of the play], a positive character, Lao Zhang, does make an appearance, and that is laudable, to be sure; but he's still an outsider. He appears as a liberator, and definitely has something of the saviour about him. Furthermore, characters that deserve no sympathy at all are unabashedly indulged. Do people like Li Xiaozhang actually exist? Of course they do. But what we've got in this play is countryside youth being represented as willing to resort to any means of deception to get back to the city. The character is a morally low being with an equally low awareness. His sole motivation in life is to get back to the city, and he is prepared to do anything to achieve this goal. By creating such a character the authors have failed to reflect the true spirit and moral perception of Chinese youth during the New Period. The broad masses of young people surely would, on reflection, feel affronted by this misrepresentation. What could have produced such a cheat? The play lays the onus of responsibility on the corrupt cadres, and by so doing treats the cheat with even greater sympathy. These are the faults of the play.

This play has been staged for quite some time, and I believe there's been a mixed reaction to it. These reactions must be seen in context. Some young people, in particular those who want to return to the cities, or parents with children in the countryside, may well react to this play positively. Another group is convinced that there will be trouble if certain special privileges enjoyed by leading cadres go unchecked, and they are in favour of exposing them. Insofar as the play works towards this end, it has performed a positive service. However, if it is permitted to be staged as it is, we must ask ourselves: what other social effects will it have? This question deserves reflection. We need to make a serious and detailed study of just how [artistic] works can be used to make a more accurate criticism of our faults so that they achieve the desired result of uniting and educating the people. In fact, the masses and cadres have already expressed a range of differing opinions concerning this work. Naturally, not all of the views expressed are correct; but some deserve our attention. We are in support of artistic works that make a correct exposé and criticism of unhealthy tendencies among party and state cadres. At the same time, we hope that our writers will sum up their experience and achieve new heights in their ideological understanding and creative expression. [...] As for the problem of what should be done with this particular play,—there's no problem at all. If, when everyone has finished discussing it, the writers themselves feel it is not a successful work and that it re-

quires major revisions, I think they should volunteer the following: 'If [the play] can't be revised satisfactorily, we agree that it should not be performed. And performances of it should be stopped for the time being.'

Units that have been performing the play as well as propaganda organizations are free to express their opinions [about the work], and they can offer the writers sincere and dispassionate help in their task. They should certainly not remain silent for fear of being accused of wielding sticks [打棍子]. To express an opinion and to use a stick to beat a work are very different things. We don't wield sticks; we use the format of a comradely discussion to raise the ideological and artistic level [of our writers]. Everyone has to be responsible to the broad masses, after all; and responsible to the 'Four Modernizations'. I believe the author is prepared to revise the play on the basis of everyone's criticisms. We hope he makes a good job of it.⁸

Only two days after this speech was made the first voice was raised in public dissent. Again, it was the voice of Ba Jin. On February 15, 1980 in an article entitled "Further Comments on Searching" 再談探索,⁹ he wrote, "There is no need to be afraid of works of literature that go crashing around like an elephant in a china shop. [To have any influence on people at all] they still have to pass through three tests: that of [their audience's] social conditioning, home education and school education. Only the most simple-minded accept everything they read uncritically, and that's only because they have nothing in their heads to start off with—there's lots of room for new things up there. Such people are rare. So surely it is just a little unfair to make works of literature responsible for absolutely everything."¹⁰ Commenting that there are still people who are against 'scar literature' 傷痕文學, he continued, "Yet even today there are those who think the scars will heal themselves as long as we keep them covered up and don't talk about them. They are not surprised that they get sores, but they are furious when others make an issue of them. When they are getting ready to let fly at a work they suddenly start making a big thing of the influence of literature"¹¹

A pointed comment indeed, but the argument in favour of limiting the availability of works which had the potential of encouraging negative 'copyist phenomena' won the day, even though the debate over 'social effect' 社會效果 had only just begun. The meeting and Hu Yaobang's speech were taken by many writers as being the first direct act of government and Party intervention in the arts since the Cultural Revolution. Not surprisingly, Sha Yexin, having been the major target for criticism, was particularly outspoken on the subject. He claimed that although the meeting had not condemned his play as a 'poisonous weed' as such, it had had the effect of a caveat on further performances which amounted to a ban (變相禁戲). The concept of 'social effect' that had been first introduced at this meeting, he said, had

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 13-4.

⁹ *Searching*, pp. 33-7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 36-7.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 37. For the significance of the timing of this essay, see Bi Hua's 璧華 'Memorializing the CPC—a critique of Ba Jin's *Random Thoughts*' 中共文藝的諍言——評巴金的《隨想錄》, *The Seventies*, April 1980, pp. 61-3.

provided a theoretical basis for this 'virtual ban' which in turn gave certain particularly dogmatic and heavy-handed leaders an excuse to suppress works they did not favour. He concluded that the upshot of all this was that most writers had begun shying away from writing works that 'interfere with life' 干預生活 in 1980, and that the cultural scene in general had suffered severely because of this meeting.¹²

Sha also claimed that although Hu Yaobang and others at the meeting had suggested that he revise *The Impostor* so as to make it fit for public display, he was not given a chance to do so.¹³ This contention was subsequently disputed by a number of people who had attended the meeting and had hoped the play could be revised.¹⁴ Although it is by no means certain that Sha was actually forestalled from revising the play, by mid-1980 his energies were otherwise engaged in the production of a major new work, *Mayor Chen Yi* 陳毅市長.¹⁵ In fact, both Sha and his co-author Yao Mingde when faced with the alternatives of either revising *The Impostor* or going on to other things, are reported as having said, "We have put the play out of our minds."¹⁶ However, as the innocuous *Mayor Chen Yi*—which was earmarked as being one of the major cultural presentations for the celebration of the thirtieth anniversary of the liberation of Shanghai—was bringing Sha back into favour with the cultural establishment and the authorities in Shanghai, he wrote a caustic article about the genesis of *The Impostor* and the opposition it had encountered. In his own defence he quoted extensively from Ba Jin (see "The Little Impostor") and in reply to the charge that his work would have a 'negative social effect' he cited other instances of fraud that had absolutely nothing to do with the play—"it is not art that has 'exaggerated' life; for life is always more 'exaggerated' than art."¹⁷ In conclusion he states, "In my opinion, no one has the right to bring down a final judgement on the effect of a work in the name of the whole 'society'. Let [social] practice be the impartial judge. History itself is fairminded, and I am convinced that in the end it will be history that will find the most reasonable and acceptable conclusion to the arguments surrounding *The Impostor*."¹⁸

The question of 'social effect', however, dominated the cultural world throughout 1980; and, in fact, it continues to do so today. Ba Jin in a tone of innocent candour that reflects a hard-won self-awareness continued his 'defence' for *The Impostor* in "More on the Little Impostor" 再談小騙子. I quote in full:—

¹² See *Wenyibao*, October 1980, pp. 24-6.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 25-6.

¹⁴ 'Not Chatter, but a Wish' 并非閑話, 而是期望, by Huang Mei 荒煤, *Wenyibao*, December 1980, pp. 23-5; 'More Chatter on "扯淡"' 也扯《扯淡》, by Feng Zi 鳳子, *ibid.*, pp. 25-6; and 'My Interjection—concerning the revision of *The Impostor*' 一段插話——關於《騙子》的修改 by Liu Jin 劉金, *Wenyibao*, February 1981, pp. 38-9.

¹⁵ A ten-act play published in *Plays* 劇本, May 1980, pp. 2-39; see also Sha Yexin's 'On the Publication of *Mayor Chen Yi*' 寫在《陳毅市長》發表的時候, *ibid.*, p. 40. This play followed on from *Advance on the East!* 東進, 東進 and *Chen Yi Emerges From*

the Mountains 陳毅出山, as part of the stage (and subsequently screen) representation of Chen Yi. This was one of the first major 'adaptations' of the figure of a deceased government leader for the arts.

¹⁶ See 'After the Staging of *If I Were Real*' 關於《假》劇演出以後的一些情況, by Zheng Huaizhi 鄭懷之, *Wenhui*, February 2, 1981.

¹⁷ See *Shanghai Drama*, June 1980, p. 5.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, also see Xie Junhua 謝俊華, 'Summing Up Experience, Determined to Reform' 總結經驗, 立志改革 in *Yalu River* 鴨綠江, January 1981, pp. 58-60, for a detailed comment on the deleterious effect of the Symposium on the cultural world in 1980.

One question that has concerned me for the last two or three years is whether it is a good idea to lie about an illness for fear of getting treatment. The conclusion I'm led to is: definitely not. However, some people would not agree. In their opinion if you don't tell anyone what is wrong with you then the very fact that you are sick will remain a secret. According to such thinking, if you have a healthy constitution then any ailment you have can cure itself: a major illness will gradually become a small one and eventually disappear altogether.

But what happens when these people do become ill? Are we supposed to believe that they don't go to the doctor? Or, don't even take medicine? In the past I was quite the innocent, but I'm a little more astute these days. Despite the fact that there are those who say I've retrogressed, that my writing is 'ungrammatical',¹⁹ my understanding of people and events is a little deeper and thorough [than in the past], and I'm not deluded so easily now.

I wrote one of my 'random thoughts' in late September last year in which I talked about a little impostor. At the time he had already been arrested and a play based on him was being staged. There were all sorts of reactions to that play, and it was even condemned on the grounds that it showed the impostor in a sympathetic light, and attempted to excuse his crimes. Accordingly it was declared that this type of play had a negative social effect and that showing it would encourage juvenile criminality, and so on and so forth. Therefore the play was not to be performed or published, 'a domestic shame should not be made public'. I haven't seen the play, but I have read it. I sympathize with those people who were cheated as well as with the little impostor. In my view, it is the social environment that we should be condemning. Rough and flawed the play may certainly be—it is like a comic skit in street theatre—but it lashes out at unhealthy social tendencies, and attacks attitudes towards social privilege. It is like a bucket of cold water thrown in the face of a person in a swoon. To my mind, the staging of the play had a very salutary effect. The play I'm talking about is called *If I Were Real*. This is what I have thought about it all along, and I have done nothing to hide my opinion. When I was in Peking for the Fourth All-China Congress of Writers and Artists I made an appeal to the leading comrades in the government that they allow this play to be performed. During the congress the play was shown a number of times, and on one occasion during a casual conversation I had with my driver he suddenly said that he had seen it and thought it wasn't at all bad. He commented that they should let it be shown.

I'm not all too clear as to the exact number of performances that have been given. But I am aware that subsequently a meeting was held in Peking to discuss the play. The playwrights were there and the defects of the play were gone into. Following on from that I heard that [the main] playwright had written another play that was very

¹⁹This refers to the criticisms of Ba Jin's essays by a number of Hong Kong University students, see *Kaijuan* 開卷 September 1980, pp. 54-6, 'What We

Think of Ba Jin's *Random Thoughts*'; and 'Further Comments on Telling the Truth' 再論說真話, *Searching*, p. 93.

popular. After that there was no more talk of the little impostor. His sentence, 'If I were really . . . ' was forgotten, well, at least until other little impostors made their appearance.

On the second page of the September 23 issue of the *Shanghai Liberation Daily*, there was the following item of news, 'Another Impostor Fools Certain Leading Cadres.' Of course, this is not referring to that other little impostor by the name of Zhang; he has been tried and sentenced. This time it is a fellow by the name of Wu. It turns out that he has been impersonating the 'nephew of a leading cadre who works in the municipal government'. He claimed he was a Section Head in the Harbin Tourist Bureau, and he 'bought a large quantity of high-quality cigarettes which he was planning to sell [at a profit] in the provinces.' Upon being eventually caught out he said, 'Everything's a question of privilege in this society; if I hadn't used people the way I did I would never have been able to buy any cigarettes'

This little impostor has been nabbed; but he is not necessarily repentant. He is smarter than any of us: while we are all tying ourselves up in knots over such questions as 'family honour', 'face' and 'scars', he's got down to brass tacks. Forbidding people from performing plays about it isn't going to solve a thing.

I have been asked whether by using the word 'little' when referring to the impostor I mean to absolve him of some guilt. Most certainly not! However, there are little impostors and big impostors. People like Zhang and Wu are only little impostors. Then there are the big impostors; and there are a lot of them. Those people who created a god and conjured up hosts of demons, with their trumped up charges and accusations, false statistics and forced 'suicides' All of those big impostors have been out of the reach of the law for long enough. Everyone is waiting for news of *their* trial. So am I.

October 9, [1980]²⁰

The trials of the 'big impostors' began at the end of 1980, but the problem of little impostors continued.²¹ And, although *The Impostor* was never revised and was staged with only the greatest difficulty, its 'social effect' had been significant. Despite being a fairly conventional stage play in theatrical terms, certain elements of *The Impostor* presaged the new range of expression of the Chinese arts in the 80s. Naturally, it was not unique in doing so; but its contribution is undeniable. The most important aspect of the play in this context was the fact that the writers had chosen to portray the impostor in a favourable light. This was pure anathema to those with an unrelenting class view—why, it was tantamount to selling out to the enemy.²² The play depicts Li Xiaozhang not as a hero—that was a matter left

²⁰ *Searching*, pp. 104-6.

²¹ There were a number of other cases of fraud similar to that of Zhang Longquan in 1980-1, and also at least two telefeatures inspired by *The Impostor* screened in late 1980 and early 1981. There were 'Who is he?' 他是誰? made by Beijing Television

and 'A Dream That's No Dream' 似夢非夢, produced by Yunnan Television. See "A Third Article on Impostors" 三談騙子 by Ba Jin, in *Telling the Truth* 真話集 (the third volume of *Random Thoughts*), Hong Kong 1982, p. 1.

²² See *Wenyibao*, April 1980, p. 4.

to the audiences—but rather as a human being. Motivated by reasonable, understandable and quite common needs and being a character-type familiar to the average Chinese urban-dweller, Li Xiaozhang had resorted to criminal means to protect and advance himself. He starts out as a victim of social inequities, and then ironically, having had a taste of the ‘good life’ as proffered by privileged society, he becomes a victim of those very inequities in reverse! He is not fated by birth or association to fall into perdition, but ultimately must be viewed as the engineer of his own tragedy; however, the writers are quite insistent in their desire to blame society as a whole for Li’s plight, and the impostor’s question, “If I were really . . . ?” could just as well be translated simply as “j’accuse”. Sha Yexin says that the play condemns Li the fraud and criminal at the same time as recognizing the reasons that drove him to crime: the Cultural Revolution and his loss of the right to live in the city, his lack of education, and most importantly the ‘encouragement’ he gets from those cadres who are besotted with their dreams of privilege and social status. This is the reason, Sha argues, why so many people sympathize with the impostor and feel little or nothing for his victims.²³

The Impostor is one of many works that although still typical of the ‘scar literature’ of 1978-9, had already moved away from simply dwelling on the past and the problems resultant from the Cultural Revolution towards a more direct study of the present. In ideological terms it foreshadowed some of the concerns of Chinese ‘humanism’ and ‘modernism’, especially in their emphasis on the individual.²⁴ Artistic interest in and appreciation of the ‘anti-hero’, that is, a figure who would previously have been treated as a negative or at best ‘middle’ character, has grown considerably since 1979, and works such as Teng Wenji’s 滕文驥 film *Village in the City* 都市裏的村莊 (1983) which has as its major theme the love story of a model worker and a petty hood, Gao Xingjian’s first play, *Alarm Signal*, in which the protagonist is a petty thief, and many other films, plays and stories, reflect this new dimension of understanding.

It is because *The Impostor* had had such an impact that, although presumably forgotten since the Symposium ‘ban’ of early 1980, the play and its main author were to be subjected to further criticism in the aftermath of the ‘Bai Hua Incident’ of 1981.

The first warning of this came in early November 1981, when Du Gao 杜高, a professional critic employed by the Dramatists’ Association, wrote an article on ‘social effect’ citing the case of Gorky’s opposition to the production of a stage version of Dostoyevsky’s *The Devils* in 1913 on the grounds that it would be

²³See *Shanghai Drama*, June 1980, p. 5.

²⁴The Chinese press carried numerous articles on the question of ‘abstract humanity’ as part of the drive to ‘clean up spiritual pollution’. Zhou Yuanbing, a noted Chinese expert on ethics, summed the problem up rather neatly in an interview: “If the notion of abstract humanity is encouraged, there will be no end of strife. Why, people will start saying, ‘Workers have an intrinsic value, as do university students and

cadres.’ This will lead to people arguing that it is inhuman to send people to work in the border regions, that to do so shows a disregard for the value of the individual. It is precisely thinking like this that has been poisoning the minds of the masses, turning them into selfish individualists. Such thinking is detrimental to our socialist cause, and will do nothing but harm to the [correct] development of one’s self.” See *Guangming Daily*, November 5, 1983.

harmful to the audience.²⁵ Du goes on to laud the 1980 Symposium and, without naming him, criticizes Sha Yexin and his talk of 'disguised bans', and so on. He then bewails the fact that a drama journal had actually gone so far as to praise the staging of *Girl Thief* and *The Impostor* in the spring as a 'victory for the courageous'.²⁶ From the appearance of this article in the *People's Daily* it was clear that more was in store for *The Impostor* and Sha. It was only a few weeks later, at the end of November 1981, that the CPC Ministry of Propaganda held another major Symposium on Scenario- and Play-writing. The press release issued after the symposium revealed that:—

At the Symposium on Scenario- and Play-writing in February 1980, following a democratic exchange concerning *If I Were Real* and other controversial works, a leading comrade from the Centre raised a number of important points in regard to cultural work in the new period. However, due to a serious failure in propagating and carrying out the spirit of that meeting, there has been a marked lack of awareness of bourgeois liberalism and its influence on creative writing, resulting, for a time, in a situation in which certain incorrect opinions that clash directly with the spirit of the Centre have gained currency in the theatre world. It has been commented that the [earlier Symposium] 'set a precedent for "disguised bans"', and there is a mistaken view that 'the raising of the theory of "social effect" has had a negative social effect in itself'. Those who hold to this view go so far as to claim that the theory of social effect is 'a stick' 棍子 and 'a restriction' 框子, as well as suggesting that 'it is still impossible to say whether the Symposium' was a success. Some journals have been engaged in disseminating seriously incorrect opinions that are in direct opposition to the spirit of the Symposium, and they declare that writers need to fortify themselves so they don't buckle under (長幾塊反骨), and that they should 'loudly sing discordant notes'. Such journals have also continued to encourage the production of *If I Were Real* and other such flawed works. It should be noted that this tendency to oppose the Symposium has not been universal, and there has been resistance to some [incorrect] views. However, in general the theatre world has been most obviously polluted by this type of bourgeois liberalism.²⁷

The intriguing thing is that in the 1980-1 period, although there was a marked drop in the amount of 'social comment' and 'dark side' literature that appeared as a result of the various strictures that had been placed on works that 'interfered with life', there was an increased interest in a more subtle, even insidious type of writing. Some authors, reluctant to deal with larger social issues and questions of the moment, were thrown back on themselves, and it was perhaps the 1980 'crack down' 收 that gave an important impetus to the development of the 'humanist' and 'modernist' aspects of contemporary Chinese literature.

²⁵ See *People's Daily*, November 11, 1983.

²⁷ See *People's Drama* 人民戲劇, April 1982, p. 31.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

Following the success of *Mayor Chen Yi* and what must have been a salutary period of self-reflection resulting from his 1980 defence of *The Impostor*, Sha Yexin came to prominence again with the production of *The Secret Life of Marx* 馬克思秘史. The popularity of *Mayor Chen Yi* seems to have emboldened the writer to attempt the stage presentation of other famous personages; but in writing a play for the centenary of Marx's death Sha may not have been aware of just how dangerous it was to try and 'humanize' the figure of Marx in 1983.

This new work chronicles Marx's private life during the period when he was working on *Das Kapital*. The play shows Marx as a garrulous, loving, at times generous and sometimes also quite petty man. For some critics, however, it is a play that makes Marx out to be all *too* human. Again, it is Sha Yexin's old 'sparring partner', Du Gao, who takes the playwright to task for his new work. In an article published in the *Guangming Daily* Du says:—

Certain playwrights having fallen prey to the influence of the bourgeois theories of humanity and humanism, have made strenuous attempts to represent abstract 'man' and human nature [on the stage]. Both of the plays depicting Marx that have been published this year obviously belong to this category.²⁸ The authors set Marx the Revolutionary against the so-called Marx the 'Man' and they even imply that a description of Marx's revolutionary activities only weakens and dulls the image of Marx the 'Man'. One of the playwrights has written a prelude to his work with the express aim of underlining this view. [See below] . . . Having taken this as his approach, our writer directs his attention to a study of the trivia of Marx's life, and he does everything in his power to create the figure of a thoroughly human man who was 'a good husband, a good father and a good friend'. He even opines that to do so is a more arduous and meaningful task than it was for Marx to write *Das Kapital*! We cannot but query: If in a play about Marx's life one does not exhaust oneself in the realistic description of Marx's tremendous revolutionary experience, or in the realization of his lofty revolutionary spirit that was devoted to the cause of liberating the working class and also his communist thinking and ideals, then what is there left of Marx the 'Man'?

How can such a play possibly help audiences understand anything about Marx, or for that matter show them what they have to learn from him? What we are looking for and encouraging in the arts is the artistic depiction of the individuality of leadership figures. While carefully avoiding simplification and conceptualization in doing so, we desire the vivid vision of the richness of the spiritual world of great men. It is on this point that both of the above playwrights are in complete disagreement with us.²⁹

²⁸The other play Du is referring to is *The Season of Cherries* 櫻桃時節, which is based on a longer French work entitled *The Paris Commune*.

²⁹See *Guangming Daily*, November 3, 1983.

As a play, Sha's *The Secret History of Marx* is staid and uninteresting,³⁰ showing none of the innovative promise of Gao Xingjian's *The Bus-stop*. Nevertheless, it is a daring and important work. Sha, all too mindful of the caveat on 'humanizing' bad elements, turned his hand to the 'demystification' of the awesome father of scientific socialism. It was bad enough that he had used the words 'secret history' 秘史 in the title of the play—words rarely used in the arts in China since Mao's condemnation of Yao Ke's 姚克 *Secret History of the Qing Court* 清宫秘史 in the early 50s—but the possibility that it would set a precedent for writing about the private nitty-gritty of the great for the stage was just too much. The full seriousness of Sha's error, however, is only clear when considered in the light of the Zhou Yang 周揚—Wang Ruoshui 王若水 speech on alienation. By late 1983, it was inevitable that the play would be denounced as a 'spiritual pollutant'.

We may not have seen the last of *The Secret History of Marx*, and we will definitely be hearing more of Sha Yexin.

³⁰My own reaction to the play which I saw during its opening season in Shanghai in April 1983, was as follows: "It is a tedious and over-acted fantasy about Marx's private life performed by beefy and hirsute Chinese actors who prance around the stage in wigs and late-nineteenth century drag. The word 'secret' in the title nearly got the play banned, but once official approval was obtained the word got out that no, there were no juicy scenes between Karl and Jenny, nor any startling revelations about Engels'

private life. I only managed to steel myself for the first two acts of the play. I heard later that it had a reasonable run courtesy of the municipal labour unions and Youth League organisation, who rallied their members and sent them along by the busload to have an evening of indulgence in this 'vivid stage realization of political struggle'." See, *Chinese Drama: To Be Or Not, The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No. 10, 1983, p. 144.