



Stones From Other Hills: The Impact of Death of a Salesman on the Revival of Chinese Theatre in the 1980s

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Stones from Other Hills:

The Impact of *Death of a Salesman* on the Revival of Chinese Theatre in the 1980s.

Qiuyu Wang

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Abstract

This study examines Arthur Miller's involvement with a 1983 production of *Death of a Salesman* in Beijing. Through an analysis of primary and secondary sources, I evaluate this production in a broader historical context to give a more nuanced and complex account of how the production came to be. I piece together previous scholarship to provide a richer historical context for the play's production. I identify the main reasons why Miller was asked to come to China, arguing that the ambiguous nature of the play served as a testing ground for Chinese artists to explore what artistic freedoms were extended to them in the years following the Cultural Revolution. The historical context of the years following the Cultural Revolution also influenced the play's reception as audiences saw, beyond Miller's theme of "one humanity," an aspiration towards economic success and individualism. Using the more complete historical context, I examine the play's impact in China and uncover aspects of its impact that may have been overlooked. I find that, in addition to what has been written about previously, the 1983 production of *Salesman* encouraged Chinese actors to learn from foreign theater while also continuing to draw on traditional techniques from Chinese opera.

Dedication

To my love: my daughter Chloe, and my husband Valentino

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Chapter I

Introduction

If, as has been said, “you can’t go farther than China,” it is still possible in the theater for one’s sense of human nature’s universality to be restored. The Chinese in the theater laugh when we would, don’t laugh when we would not. The cultural information is quite different East and West, but what the heart makes of it is quite similar.

(Miller, “In China” 113)

Arthur Miller is arguably one of the most influential American playwrights in China. This was especially true during the 1980s, when China reopened its gate to the world after struggling through a long, dark period during the Cultural Revolution¹. Miller first traveled to China as a dramatist and “cultural diplomat” in 1978, when China and the U.S. normalized their diplomatic relations (Han 69). He was then invited to direct his play *Death of a Salesman* in Beijing in 1983, and the enormous success of this production helped him garner widespread fame in China. Because of this personal contact, Miller’s

¹ The Cultural Revolution was a socio-political movement, initiated by Mao Zedong, that took place in China from 1966 to 1976. One of its distinctive features was that most of China's intellectuals were sent to rural labor “re-education” camps for extended periods of time.

relationship with China was “unparalleled” among American playwrights of his time (Kang).

The significance of Miller’s direct involvement in the production of a play in China cannot be overstated. This was the first time in history a foreign director produced his own play with China’s premier theatre organization, and it was also the first time Miller directed one of his own plays abroad (Yuan 103). Kang claims that Beijing’s *Salesman* was “the most important event in Sino-American theater exchange history since the normalization of American and Chinese relations” and compares it almost to “Ping-pong” (Kang). The 1983 production of *Death of a Salesman* was “the first truly successful new play since the end of the Cultural Revolution” (Ying and Conceison 167).

Miller attributed much of his success in Beijing to his belief in “one humanity” (Miller, *Salesman* 5). While this message of “one humanity” came through via the effort he and his collaborators expended in making the play palatable to Chinese audiences, there were also other messages that came across unexpectedly. In this paper, I study what allowed *Salesman*, a modern American drama, to be acceptable to an audience in socialist China. What messages, besides Miller’s message of humanity, were received? In order to investigate this question, the historical context surrounding the production must also be examined, including Miller’s personal popularity in China. This context also influenced the reception of his work and allowed for unique interpretations of his work among a Chinese audience. In this paper, I provide a more nuanced and complex account of how the production came to be and of the extent to which *Salesman* had a meaningful impact

on the Chinese theatre.

Perhaps due to the positive reception from Soviet Union critics or Miller's left wing political views, which made him a target of McCarthyists, Miller's work was introduced to China as early as the 1960s (Kang). In the early 1960s, Mei Shaowu—a well-known literary translator and drama critic—wrote a Chinese synopsis of each of Miller's major plays (J. Liu). From 1977 onward, almost all of Miller's major plays were translated into Chinese. *The Crucible* and *Death of a Salesman* were among the first American plays to be staged in China since the 1940s, with *The Crucible* first produced at the Shanghai People's Theatre in 1981 and *Death of a Salesman* at the Beijing People's Art Theatre² in 1983. The success of *The Crucible* introduced Chinese audiences to Miller's work and suggested that other works by Miller would also be well received.

The 1983 Beijing production of *Death of a Salesman* was notable due to Arthur Miller's involvement, working with a local, Chinese cast. Miller traveled to China at the behest of Cao Yu—a prominent playwright and head of the prominent Beijing People's Art Theatre—and Ying Ruocheng—a director, translator, and one of the theatre's leading actors who would later become the Vice Minister of Culture in China. This production attracted mass media attention, including coverage from Xinhua News Agency—China's official, largest, and most influential media agency. The *Xinhua News Bulletin* included “Arthur Miller Arrives in Beijing to Direct *Death of a Salesman*” as a major news event

² The Beijing People's Art Theatre is a theatre company founded by playwright Cao Yu in 1952. It is widely regarded as the flagship of Chinese drama companies and has trained a large group of top actors.

of the day on March 21, 1983. The article introduced Miller and his collaborators, Cao and Ying, emphasizing Miller's 1978 trip to China and how Chinese drama made a "deep impression" on the playwright ("Arthur Miller Arrives"). Xinhua implies that *Salesman* was a parable for American capitalism, describing Willy Loman as "a weary figure, loyal to a company which eventually makes him its victim" ("Arthur Miller Arrives").

According to the article, the purpose of staging the play in China was to "better understand the American theater and appreciate Western art in directing plays," quoting Ying's words ("Arthur Miller Arrives").

American newspaper reporters were as curious as their Chinese counterparts, and "gathered to see how Willy Loman, the best-known dramatic representative of American capitalism and the American Dream, would go over in Beijing" (Stross ix). The *New York Times*'s coverage one day before opening night highlighted both the play's ambivalent view of the American dream, while also framing its performance as "one of the most significant events for Chinese theater since the end of the Cultural Revolution," highlighting "the more ambiguous nature of contemporary Western drama" as opposed to the "prim Socialist morality plays" of Chinese theatre (Wren, "Willy"). The paper seems to have expressed anticipation for the reception of Loman, the "salesman 'riding on a smile and a shoeshine to self-destruction,'" among a Socialist audience (Wren, "Willy")

After an opening night that was widely acclaimed, the production had about seventy showings including tours to Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan, and Canada. The reviews were generally positive; the play was praised as "heartening" (Z. Wang 6), a

“touching, heartbreaking, profound American tragedy” (G. Wu, “Tuixiaoyuan”), “a great play with a profound meaning that reflected reality to a great extent” (H. Liu 234), and marked by actors’ genuine, outstanding performances (Yuan 107-8). It was seen as the master collaboration of “two geniuses: Arthur Miller and Ying Ruocheng” (Qian and Ou, “Tuixiaoyuan” 88) that freshened *Salesman* to be “new and worldwide” (Ou and Qian, “Death” 57).

This exciting experiment was well documented by many, including the two key people who made the production possible in the first place: Arthur Miller (in his eight-week journal *Salesman in Beijing*) and Ying Ruocheng (in his autobiography *Voices Carry*). Many other personnel involved in the production, such as the famous actress Zhu Lin (who played Linda), Zhu Xu (Charley), and Gu Wei (Bill) have published memoirs and interviews discussing this historical event as well. These reflections are notable because they capture both Miller’s experience with the production as well as the Chinese collaborators’ in their own words. Reading these sources provides a fuller picture of the production’s history, both reinforcing each other’s accounts while also highlighting contrasts between the views of Miller and his Chinese counterparts. In addition to these primary sources, I also examine secondary sources about the production, including relevant reviews, critiques, and papers, alongside primary sources directly touching on the production, such as journals, memoirs, interviews, and biographies of the key figures involved. Combining my primary and secondary sources allows the creation of a broader historical context of the play’s production.

The motivation for this unprecedented act, according to Cao and Ying, was “to investigate Western playwriting in order to begin the search for new contemporary Chinese theatrical forms and acting styles” (Miller, *Salesman* vi). Miller, who preferred to write rather than direct plays, consented to devote nearly two months to this project because “it seemed like an adventure to [him]—a window into China that [was] without parallel” (qtd. in Wren, “Willy”). My research indicates that these motives were only part of the reasons for the play’s production. For Ying and Cao, the play offered more than just a new theatrical form, and for Miller, the chance to work in China was more than an adventure. I investigate why Miller was asked to come to China, why *Salesman* was the play that was chosen, and why Miller agreed to the venture.

Another issue I would like to explore in this paper is what the “cultural cleavage between Brooklyn and Beijing” was and what changes to the play Miller and his Chinese collaborators made in order to make it accessible to the Chinese public (Cohn 191). In a 1983 CBS show about the production of *Death of a Salesman* in Beijing, reporter Bill Moyers noted that “No two people strike one another as more disparate than the Americans and Chinese. Nor is there a play seemingly more Western and less Oriental than *Death of a Salesman*” (“Willy”). When the play arrived in China, the “unlikeliest destination of all,” Willy Loman had to try to win the heart of Chinese audience, whose culture seemed worlds apart from his (“Willy”). Right before going on this trip, Miller said that he hoped he could make “a kind of a penetration” into the hearts and mind of China, and that they would do the same with him (“Willy”). He obviously succeeded in

this seemingly impossible mission. I study if Miller's message of "one humanity" did come through and what other messages came through. Was the cultural difference discovered during the process indeed as large as what Moyers said, and what obstacles did Miller and his Chinese collaborators have to overcome? I also examine how apparent differences between Miller and his collaborators, and more broadly *Salesman* and Chinese theatre, resulted in commonalities, and how contrasting views were found in what was assumed to be shared common ground.

Critical works have examined the production's influence on Chinese theatre. Scholars believe that the successful production of *Death of a Salesman* in Beijing "led to the revival of *Salesman* in the U.S. and a breakthrough in Chinese theatre in the 1980s" (Ou and Qian, "Death" 57). According to Professor Claire Conceison, Beijing's *Salesman* forever changed how Chinese actors portrayed foreigners on stage (Miller, '*Death of a Salesman*' in *Beijing* xix). The production, according to Chinese scholars Ou Rong and Qian Zhaoming, "not only has had an impact on Chinese playwrights and directors but also resulted in a different acting style [in staging] foreign plays" (Ou and Qian, "Death" 71). Scholars praised the production for pioneering and modeling the localization of foreign plays in China (Wen and Xu; Yang). The production inspired more tragedies about the crash of the common man's dreams, like the hit show *Uncle Doggie's Nirvana* (G. Wu, "Gour ye" 11; W. Wu, "Tuixiaoyuan" 64), by breaking out from Stanislavski's socialist realism to make use of modern dramatic forms, like stream of consciousness, to depict deeper and multitudinous thoughts and feelings (W. Wu, "Tuixiaoyuan" 64). This

collaboration had a lasting influence on the actors with whom Miller worked. They nostalgically remembered Miller's "supportive, caring manner towards actors" and called working with Miller "one of the most enriching and satisfying experiences" of their acting careers (Miller, *'Death of a Salesman' in Beijing* xix-xx). Miller also suggested that he had a "good deal riding on the production" perhaps due to "the chance of opening up the world's largest country to his work" and the presence of a "surprising number of foreign journalists, including the principal American television networks" (Biggsby, *Arthur Miller, 1962-2005* 320). The success of the Beijing production, viewed by Western critics as "the most pointed affirmation of the play's broad cultural appeal," rekindled a new interest in *Death of a Salesman* in America (Schlueter 158). I piece together previous scholarship to provide a full historical context for the play's production. Through this more comprehensive account, I examine the play's impact in China and uncover aspects of its impact that may have been previously overlooked.

Going to Beijing to direct a production of his masterpiece, *Death of a Salesman*, with a Chinese cast "speaking in its own language (of which [Miller] spoke not more than two words)" (Houghton) seemed to Miller to be a "fantastic adventure," as he himself called it ("Willy"). Stross notes the following about other productions of *Salesman* in foreign countries:

Death of a Salesman had been staged in other socialist countries, such as the Soviet Union, without his personal participation; in those cases, the play had been reduced to a morality tale about the evils of capitalism. But in 1983 the Chinese were clearly in the midst of ideological change, and

their interpretation of *Salesman* seemed likely to be original. The unpredictability of the outcome and the symmetry of paired opposites—socialist Chinese actors staging a play about capitalist America—was intriguing to Miller, and to the wider world as well. (Stross ix)

The 1983 Chinese production of *Death of a Salesman* undoubtedly marks “a significant moment of Sino-American cross-cultural collaboration” (Kong 35). Yet, though he might have anticipated the significance of the cross-cultural event, Miller did not necessarily foresee the nature and direction of the event’s impact (35). Miller on many occasions, as previously stated, said that one of his main motives in coming to Beijing was to try to show that there is only one humanity (Houghton). While Miller ostensibly hoped that his message of humanity might shield the production from political pressure, I argue both Miller and his play cannot be separated from their political leanings. I examine the role of political ideology in this production of *Salesman*, with special emphasis on how the changing political environment in China at the time permeated all aspects of the production. I argue that *Salesman*’s production history and reception must be in part examined through this political lens.

As one of the first Sino-US cultural exchanges following the Cultural Revolution, the 1983 production of *Death of a Salesman* is noteworthy because, to this day, contemporary Chinese theatre is still searching for its own place on the world scene while continuing to learn from Western theatre traditions. Revisiting early cultural exchanges, such as Arthur Miller’s Beijing production of *Death of a Salesman*, may inform us on how such collaborations can benefit Chinese theatre.

Chapter II

A Coincidental Yet Inevitable Encounter

One in four human beings is Chinese. This can be an awkward circumstance when, for example, one speaks of “world’s greatest” writers or actors or painters, and he or she is utterly unknown to the Chinese. And since the greats of Chinese culture are nearly equally unknown outside of China’s borders, the isolation of this great people seems as incredible as the parochialism of both sides.

(Miller, *Death of a Salesman in Beijing* xxxvi)

From September 18 to October 12, 1978, Arthur Miller paid a private visit to China with his wife, Inge Morath. During the visit, he met many prominent Chinese artists and playwrights who had only recently been released from countryside reform and labor camps following the eradication of the Gang of Four³. Among them, he met Cao Yu and Ying Ruocheng, both playwrights who had “some personal experience in the United States and [were] eager to begin opening their country to the post-World War II international repertoire” (Miller, *Death of a Salesman in Beijing* xxxvi). In the

³ The Gang of Four was a political faction that formed in China during the Cultural Revolution, composed of four Communist Party officials: Jiang Qing (Mao Zedong’s wife and the Gang’s leader), Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan, and Wang Hongwen. The Gang of Four held considerable power throughout the latter stages of the Cultural Revolution and was overthrown shortly after Mao’s death in 1976.

subsequent years, Cao and Ying talked about bringing one of Miller's plays to China and having him direct it, and in 1982, they ultimately made their choice: *Death of a Salesman*. This decision eventually brought about the most significant U.S.-Sino cultural event of that decade.

The encounter between Ying, Cao and Miller was destined to happen. For Miller, China was his "early commitment" (Bigsby, *Arthur Miller 1962-2005* 278). He spoke of his fond impression of China in his youth:

For me, China was primarily a political and social revolution I had followed since the thirties when the names of Mao Tse-tung and Chou En-Lai and Chu Teh were like flares shot into the sky out of a human sea, a hitherto silent mass of people suddenly defying the Japanese fascists and prophesying the dawn of reason and liberty in Asia. For a while I had had the friendship, too, of Edgar Snow, who would stop by to pick up his soon-to-be wife, Lois Wheeler, after her performances in my play *All My Sons*. His *Red Star Over China*, the best single piece of reportage I have ever read and surely among the most influential ever written about what seemed at the time to promise a new stage of human development, a Marxist revolution whose leaders had a sense of humor, irony, and, in Chou's case a cultivated sensibility one had never associated with their kind in the Soviet Union. (Miller, "In China" 91)

Miller's desire to go to China started long before his 1978 trip. According to theatre critic Christopher Bigsby, Miller had previously tried to obtain a Chinese visa twice but failed both times. The first time, in February 1973, Miller sent a telegram and a letter to Premier Zhou Enlai of China. In the letter, he emphasized his friendship with Edgar Snow and asked for help obtaining visas for him and his wife to meet with Zhou and other revolutionary leaders, as well as common people, in hopes of ultimately writing

a book about the experience. About this first attempt, Bigsby notes: “The response from [Z]hou Enlai was silence. Evidently the idea of a writer and photographer wandering around his country failed to appeal” (*Arthur Miller 1962-2005* 232). Miller made a second attempt in 1976, asking for help from the Chinese Ambassador to the U.S. Miller “[pointed] out that his letter of 1973 had yet to be answered,” but still, “this time the answer was not silence but refusal” (233).

In the late 1970s, China and the U.S. started to normalize their relationship. Foreign citizens could visit China as part of an organized tourist group or as guests invited by an official Chinese organization in China (Ying and Conceison 157). With the help of the Center for U.S.-China Arts Exchange—founded in 1978 at Columbia University—and the Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, Miller and his wife finally stepped foot in China in 1978.

In fact, Miller had “arrived in China long before he and his wife Inge Morath actually visited in 1978” (Miller, *Death of a Salesman’ in Beijing* ix). *Death of a Salesman* first became available in English in 1949—the same year it was published in the United States—at prominent Chinese universities, such as Tsinghua in Beijing. Ying, then enrolled as an undergraduate in Tsinghua’s Foreign Languages and Literatures Department, recalled when he first read the play that he “was so drawn to the play” and that “it left a very deep impression” on him (Ying and Conceison 122-123). Ying had been dreaming about putting the play on stage in China since he had first read it back in 1949, but he concluded that “it certainly wasn’t...an appropriate time to introduce

something like that,” the People’s Republic of China having just been created (122-123).

He imagined “what it would be like if only we could stage Miller’s play” (123). Ying recounted:

I remember toying with the idea, saying to my classmates, “But anybody can understand the plight of this Willy Loman. The circumstances may be a little different, but what he faces is the same all the world over. As a father, he is willing to give up his life for his children. This is something any Chinese would understand.” (123)

In his autobiography *Voices Carry*, Ying tells how, in 1978, he learned from a friend working in the Friendship Association that a tourist by the name of Arthur Miller, the same name as the famous playwright that he kept talking about, was visiting Beijing. He initially dismissed it as a coincidence, but after finding out that “it was indeed *the* Arthur Miller,” Ying was extremely excited and told his friend to “get [a]hold of him and don’t let him out of [his] sight” (Ying and Conceison 158). Ying also informed playwright Cao Yu, the head of the Beijing People’s Art Theatre at the time, who shared in his excitement. Together they tracked Miller to his hotel. Miller was surprised to have received the unexpected visitors, but all three connected quickly. Ying and Cao introduced Miller to many other writers and artists who revealed their sufferings during the Cultural Revolution, and the two invited him to attend a performance of the play *Cai Wenji* by Guo Moruo, a prominent, mainstream Chinese playwright. Miller was excited by this unexpected chance to observe modern Chinese theatre first-hand. Ying wrote, “that first encounter was the beginning of a deep friendship” between him and Miller

(158).

At the end of the *Cai Wenji* performance, Cao invited Miller to join the actors backstage for an impromptu discussion of the play. Asked to share his comments on the production, Miller initially complimented the performance for “the magnificent sets and costumes,” “the strong and...exotic acting,” and called the show a “superb” production and “one of the best” artistic directions he had ever seen (Miller, “In China” 114; Ying and Conceison 159). But then, sensing Cao would not let him off the hook without speaking honestly, Miller launched himself “insanely into the criticism of [the] Chinese play commonly thought to be a masterwork” (Miller, “In China” 115). Miller recalled the conversation he had with Cao below:

Miller: Quite candidly, I assume it is my unfamiliarity with your history, but I have to tell you that the play itself I found rather boring.

Cao: Why do you think it bored you, can you tell?

Miller: I thought that the story was being told four and possibly five separate times in the first hour. A different set of characters repeat it, but they add very little new each time.

Cao: Hurrah! Here we are for six months trying to figure out why this play is so boring and he sees it once and tells us!

(Miller, “In China” 114-115)

Ying also similarly recorded the episode in his book *Voices Carry*, in which he offered more details about Miller’s comments and the astonished reaction he and the Chinese artists had:

“As a playwright, I can’t help feeling that there are many places that ought

to be revised.” Everyone was shocked, because no one was supposed to criticize Guo Moruo—it was like criticizing Mao Zedong himself. Nobody dared show any reaction since this was a world-renowned playwright speaking. I don’t think [Miller] had any idea that he had just crossed a line. He continued, “The playwright made a mistake with this play, which a lot of beginners are likely to make.” He called Guo Moruo a beginner! And there was more. “The whole story—the plot of the play—has been fully developed in Act I, so he has nothing left for the rest of the play—no more suspense. The remainder of the play is just a repetition of the same old story, and that’s something a playwright should never do.” An awkward silence ensued. At last, Cao Yu broke the silence, applauding, “Bravo! Bravo!” Thank God that Guo Moruo was not there. He had died a few months earlier. (Ying and Conceison 159)

Both Miller and his Chinese counterparts were shocked but happy about this heart-to-heart conversation. Miller was surprised yet rejoiced at how easily he and the Chinese artists could understand each other. He credited this to the universal laws shared in the theatre world (Miller, “In China” 114-115). On the other hand, the Chinese artists were surprised and impressed with Miller’s honest, precise, and enlightening critique of *Cai Wenji*’s weaknesses. Such candid encounters immediately built trust between Miller and the Chinese artists. Later during the trip, Miller had more opportunities to watch other Chinese opera performances. To his surprise, Miller appreciated the Chinese operas a great deal, which exceeded his expectations. He stated that he “would never have believed that [he] could be so taken with Chinese opera, and Chinese theater altogether, the realistic plays less so, however. In Chinese opera the artificiality is so honest!” (Miller and Morath 71). One scholar believed Miller’s impressive, insightful critiques on Chinese theatre, playwriting, and direction propelled Cao to send an invitation soon after for Miller to direct one of his plays in Beijing (W. Wu, *Kua Wenhua* 24).

In addition to this artistic affinity, Miller's experiences in the McCarthy era allowed him to quickly bond with Ying, Cao, and other Chinese artists due to their experiences in the Cultural Revolution. This allowed them to eventually undertake a formidable collaboration later on despite their coming from two vastly divergent worlds. A *New York Times* reporter writing about a round table at Columbia University in 1980, where Miller and Cao represented the West and East respectively, commented that they both had "battle scars as dissidents, as thinkers who were menaced by their Governments and who have persisted and overcome" (Shepard). In addition to Cao, this account describes Miller's similarities with most of his collaborators in Beijing, recently freed from labor camps. Ying recalls how thrilled and touched Cao was by Miller's courage, found in his revealing self-reflection in his autobiographical play *After The Fall*, when Cao and Ying saw its performance in Washington. When watching the scene where the character Quentin, upon learning of the suicide of a communist friend whom he had defended in a controversial political case, feels joy and relief because he no longer needs to testify for him, Cao said "Didn't we all go through similar things during the Cultural Revolution? Only people with enormous courage could reveal themselves like that. That is the sign of a great writer" (Ke, 196). Likewise, Miller felt that his experiences during the McCarthy era also prepared him to understand the sufferings Chinese artists had gone through during the Cultural Revolution (Stross x). In his book, *Chinese Encounters*, Miller lamented the "waste of talented people" during that trying period (Miller and Morath 112).

As pointed out in a 2012 TV documentary about the 1983 production of *Death of a Salesman* in Beijing, there was a distinct parallel between Miller and his Chinese counterparts at the time of their encounter: they both were looking for breakthroughs in the theatre world they loved after decades of suffering in their own lives. Miller had faced numerous adversities, including his divorce from Marilyn Monroe, a struggle with McCarthyism, and questionings from critics about his ability to produce new, great plays. During the same period, Ying and Cao—like many other Chinese intellectuals—were sent to Cadre Schools to do hard labor and witnessed in despair the downfall of Chinese theatre. Miller was looking for new connections and ideas for future works when he visited China. Meanwhile, Ying and Cao were exploring the possibilities for innovation in the Chinese theatre world (“Renmin”). These likeminded theatre geniuses, who admired one another’s talents and tenacity and sympathized with one another’s afflictions, met at the right time to take on a mission that would greatly impact the theatre world. In Miller’s journal, he wrote, “it is both strange and somehow logical that I should be directing this same play in a room where more than a hundred actors spent years whiling away their blacklisted time” (qtd. in Stross x).

Arthur Miller’s first trip to China also came with some unpleasant surprises. During his meetings with the Chinese artists, Miller realized that, despite being a world-famous playwright, he was largely unknown to the Chinese, with the exception of very few people, like Ying, who had had the opportunity to read some of his plays in English. Miller recalled that after the Chinese artists had completed their introductions, “they then

asked me who I was and what I had done. I had assumed at least some minimal awareness on that score, but I managed to down my embarrassment at having put forward my credits” (Miller and Morath 15). Even Huang Zuolin, one of China’s greatest directors in history, who was “fluent in English and well acquainted with British and European dramatists...was previously unaware of Miller’s plays or his stature as a playwright in the United States” (Miller, *Death of a Salesman’ in Beijing* xiii). Huang had to resort to a synopsis of Miller’s work by Mei Shaowu that had been published in a Chinese journal (J. Liu)⁴. Miller was also astonished that not only did Chinese artists not know him, but also they “knew nothing...of any other American playwright after O’Neill, or, for that matter, of Europeans much after Gorky” (Miller, *Death of a Salesman’ in Beijing* xxxvii). Su Shuyang, a Chinese writer who met Miller in China, recalled that “when the Chinese writers requested Arthur Miller to recommend some influential American literature works in recent years, they had heard of none of the books Miller recommended. Similarly, Miller seemed to know little of the works that had been translated to Chinese” (Su 121). To be fair, Miller also knew neither much about the great Chinese artists he met, nor did he know much about their works. Arthur Miller was right when he said that “the isolation of this great people seems as incredible as the

⁴ Ying recalls back to when he heard Arthur Miller was in Beijing: “I immediately informed Cao Yu—he had heard of Arthur Miller too, of course” (Ying and Conceison 158). Mei Shaowu instead recounts the following during the first meeting between Miller and Cao: “Miller knew that Cao Yu was China’s premier playwright, but Cao Yu told him, ‘You are an American playwright? I never heard of you.’ Miller felt very strange and a bit unhappy” (qtd. in J. Liu). This episode was reported to Xia Yan, the vice-deputy of the Chinese Theatre Association. Xia then called Mei and asked him to send a copy of his synopses of Miller’s plays to Huang Zuolin, who would later meet Miller, to repair the damage (J. Liu).

parochialism of both sides” (Miller, *Salesman* v).

During his 1978 visit, Miller noted how genuinely curious the Chinese artists were about Western art (Miller and Morath 89) and how they were “anxious to embrace the outside world” (Bigsby, *Arthur Miller, 1962-2005* 321). Miller noticed how much the Chinese “really [did] want to know foreign stuff” despite being deprived of it for such a long time (Miller and Morath 28-29). At the same time, Miller said “knowing about China is like eating peanuts: the more you get the more you want” (Miller, *Salesman* 165). He was curious about what the Chinese people had “all been doing in their lives since 1949—the catastrophes, the hours of triumph, the threats to life and career, the sheer living they have managed to get through...I must learn about them,” he added (Miller, *Salesman* 8-9). The embarrassment of not knowing each other motivated the ambitious, curious artists to fill in this gap and made them eager to learn from each other. To this end, what could be better than a collaboration like staging *Salesman* in Beijing?

Chapter III

Bringing the Flawed Hero to Beijing

Willy Loman does everything that a self-respecting revolutionary cadre would not do. He brags, lies, has affairs with women, raises children in the wrong way and finally kills himself.

(Wren, "Theater")

Of all Western plays, why did the Beijing People's Art Theatre choose *Death of a Salesman* to produce in Beijing? Furthermore, why did they insist on inviting Arthur Miller, the foreign playwright, to direct the production himself? And why did Miller accept? *Salesman* was definitely a risky play to choose, given its ambiguity, rather than the precision typical of Chinese theatre at the time, both in character and message. The play introduces a flawed hero: the tragic Willy Loman, whose lofty dreams and financial hardships lead to his downfall. While Willy's character alone could be a moral indictment against capitalism, the play also presents Charley, a generous, loving, almost perfect capitalist. This type of ambiguity in the play led Miller to be hesitant about going to Beijing to direct it; Chinese audiences were not accustomed to moral ambiguity, and the play was too political to risk becoming simply anti-American propaganda, Miller thought.

Beyond that, Miller questioned whether the actors, trained in a different style of acting, could pull off his characters. Everything about the play, from its ambiguity to its acting style to its nonconventional form, would seem to be new in China. But, in the end, Miller took on the challenge to direct the play, and it became a hit.

I argue that Willy Loman's nature as a flawed hero served to introduce ambiguity into Chinese theatre, which desperately needed it. By opening up Chinese theatre to ambiguity, the Beijing *Salesman* helped revitalize and push forward a stagnant theatre scene. In this chapter, I explore how Chinese artists, as well as Miller, had overlapping and often differing motives for introducing ambiguity to Chinese theatre. Through this exploration, this chapter unpacks the larger political and artistic goals of this hallmark collaboration.

The Choice of *Salesman*

Plans to stage a Miller play in Beijing and have Miller himself direct it started in 1978. The play that Cao and Ying first proposed was *All My Sons*. A year and a half later, when they came to New York in 1980 to arrange for a touring production of *Teahouse* in the U.S., Cao and Ying changed their minds: they wanted *Death of Salesman* (Miller, '*Death of a Salesman*' in *Beijing* xxxvii). In the fall of 1982, Ying came to the U.S. as the Edgar Snow Visiting Professor of Theater at the University of Missouri. He and Miller discussed in earnest the possibility of staging *Death of Salesman* again, and Miller finally

agreed to it on the condition that Ying play Willy Loman and translate the play into Chinese himself (Ying and Conceison 161).

Salesman was not the first of Miller's plays performed in China. In 1981, Huang Zuolin directed a production of *The Crucible* in Shanghai, considered a huge success. To attract a larger audience, the title was changed to *The Witches of Salem* (J. Liu), and the production used "deliberate allusions to the Cultural Revolution that echoed the 'scar literature' discourse of the day" (Miller, *Death of a Salesman' in Beijing* xiii). It was critically well received and ran for fifty-two performances (xiii). There were reports of "audiences moved to tears by the memories the tale evoked of their own sufferings during the Cultural Revolution" (Miller, *Death of a Salesman' in Beijing* xxxviii). One member of the audience could not believe that the play had been written by an American, while another wrote to Huang and said: "History is often astonishingly similar. It was a hard lesson. We should not allow tragedy to repeat itself again" (J. Liu). A Chinese writer, who spent six and a half years in solitary confinement and whose daughter was murdered by the Red Guards, told Miller: "some of the interrogations...were precisely the same ones used on us in the Cultural Revolution" (Miller, *Timebends* 348). It was "chilling" for Miller to realize that, in both instances, the tyranny of youth was incredibly similar (348).

Consequently, when Ying asked Miller which one of his plays he wanted to stage in China, Miller suggested *The Crucible* because of the success of Huang Zuolin's production of the play in 1981 in Shanghai (Ying and Conceison 160). Ying felt otherwise. He told Miller that *The Crucible* would have been an "uninteresting choice" if

chosen “merely for the theme of unjust persecution” (160). This was because works that dealt with persecutions were the “fashion” during that scar literature period after the Cultural Revolution and had since become trite. Furthermore, “China’s trauma had gone much deeper than the persecution of intellectuals” (160).

Ying instead suggested *Death of a Salesman* because: (1) putting *Death of a Salesman* on stage had been Ying’s dream since his college years, as mentioned earlier, (2) Ying felt it was “the most representative of Miller’s works as the play that had jumpstarted his formidable career” (Miller, *‘Death of a Salesman’ in Beijing* xiv), and (3) Ying thought the form of *Death of a Salesman* was truly novel for Chinese theatre, saying that “*Death of a Salesman* was truly a breath of fresh air, especially because of the way it was staged” (Ying and Conceison 160). The play was also chosen for being “a realistic piece...and the Beijing People’s Art Theatre [was] known for its realistic style of acting” (Yuan 104). In addition, *Salesman* was selected for its “relevant theme which appeals to a Chinese audience: love and conflict within a family, the longing for one’s children to succeed in life,” and for “the descriptions of the problems and conflicts existing in America in the 40s, which help Chinese better understand the country and its people” (104).

The timing for *Salesman*’s staging could not have been better. In the period between Miller’s two visits, China experienced profound changes at a remarkable speed. It was beginning to open up to the West “in ways that offered points of contacts” with the play (Biggsby, *Arthur Miller, 1962-2005* 320). The Chinese government was promoting a

market economy and encouraging profit-making. By 1983, private salesmen were starting to work in the streets of Beijing (Cohn 192). When Miller was in Beijing to direct *Salesman*, he noticed that “you go out on the street here on a Sunday...and you see hawkers and pushcart peddlers and it reminds you of the Lower East Side of Manhattan 40 years ago” (“Arthur Miller Says”). Moreover, artists further experimented with their artistic styles to acclimate their audiences to a “more sophisticated style” (Ou and Qian, “Death” 61). Ying told *The New York Times* in 1983 that “the ground [had] been prepared [over] the last three years in a number of foreign and Chinese productions that [had] broken out of this naturalistic style” to prepare audiences to appreciate the novelty of Willy Loman’s flashbacks through time and space (Wren, “Theater”). So, in a few short years from when they originally read the play, the Beijing People’s Art Theatre decided Chinese audiences might become “sophisticated enough to follow *Salesman*” (Miller, *Death of a Salesman’ in Beijing* xxxvii).

Death of a Salesman was chosen over *The Crucible* and *All My Sons* for introducing “newer and more challenging aspects of modern theatre” to the Chinese, who had been isolated from “such fresh forms” during the Cultural Revolution (Miller, *Death of a Salesman’ in Beijing* xiv). However, it was unclear whether the Chinese artists would be able to produce this play successfully without outside help, especially considering that the Chinese actors were trained out of a “very different cultural tradition” and, in Miller’s words, “in an unrealistic style that was at its worst melodramatic and intolerably overemphatic compared with understated Western acting” (Miller, *Salesman* vi). Ying

and Cao, on behalf of the Beijing People's Art Theatre, insisted that Miller come to China to direct the play himself with the Chinese cast (vii). Their goal was to "investigate Western playwriting in order to begin the search for new contemporary Chinese theatrical forms and acting styles" (vi). Miller's invitation to China "[was] therefore cast as genesis in two senses, aesthetic and pedagogical... [to] teach the Chinese 'new forms' of drama and the methods of staging these... [with Miller's] knowledge that the Chinese collectively lack" (Kong 38-39).

Anticipation and Hesitation: Miller's Choice

The invitation to stage *Death of a Salesman* attracted Miller because of the "challenges of adapting this particular play, about American capitalism, for an audience in a socialist China" (Stross ix). Miller took the *Salesman* suggestion from his Chinese collaborators seriously because he "believed he owed the Chinese people something in the choice of the play" (Ying and Conceison 160). However, Miller had his concerns. He felt apprehensive that his effort might "end in calamity" because *Salesman* was "far more culture-bound" than *The Crucible*, which had been successfully staged in Shanghai (Miller, *'Death of a Salesman' in Beijing* xxxviii). According to Miller, China "was more than ninety percent peasant," and he thought that Chinese audiences wouldn't even know what life insurance was. Willy Loman "had sprung out of a world of business ambition" with values that strongly contradicted those Miller thought that the Chinese had learned

(xxxviii).

Miller's concerns were shared by many, but the American ambassador Arthur Hummel and the political officer, Charles Freeman, from the U.S. Embassy in Beijing felt otherwise (Miller, "Salesman at Fifty" 467; Bigsby, *Remembering* 291). The political officer argued that the Chinese "knew business back here two thousand years ago" and that "they were buying and selling before Marco Polo thought he invented the whole thing in Europe" (Bigsby, *Remembering* 291). When the magazine *Newsweek* asserted that Chinese audiences would not be able to comprehend the play because there were no salesmen in China, Miller became furious and reiterated the words of the political officer: "These are the guys who were sitting here 800 years ago, buying low and selling high" (Stross xi). Even the Beijing People's Art Theatre initially concluded "audiences would not be able to follow *Salesman*" (Bigsby, *Arthur Miller, 1962-2005* 320). Miller had heard similar reactions some thirty years earlier in the U.S., when he had written the play. At that time, people had also been wondering "whether the audience was going to follow Willy through the corridors of his mind" (qtd. in Wren, "Willy"). Josh Logan—the famous stage and film director—"apologetically withdrew" \$500 from the \$1,000 he had initially invested in *Salesman* after reading the script (Miller, "Salesman at Fifty" 465-466). However, Columbia University Professor Chou Wen-chung, the head of the U.S.-China Arts Exchange, insisted that the Chinese people would be able to understand Willy Loman. Chou's enthusiasm, "added to the hopes of Ying Ruocheng and Cao Yu, made the whole project seem worthwhile" (Miller, *Death of a Salesman' in Beijing* xxxviii).

Miller was finally convinced to go forward with the production, but he had another concern. Even though the Chinese “seemed to approach *Salesman* without any ideological agenda” during his contacts with them (Stross x), he was nevertheless worried the play “might be reduced to a political message—an indictment of American capitalism,” which had happened when the play was staged in the Soviet Union (Diamond 110). Miller complained that “when *Salesman* was staged in the Soviet Union some years ago...Soviet producers made comic figures out of its characters in a well-orchestrated swipe at ‘monopoly capitalism’” (“Arthur Miller Says”). The concern that the play would simply become anti-American propaganda was widespread in the Western world. In a media conference held on March 25, 1983, with “four or five TV crews from the American and Canadian networks and a dozen still photographers of many nationalities” present, journalists questioned why the company chose *Salesman* and whether it was going to be used as anti-American propaganda (Miller, ‘*Death of a Salesman*’ in *Beijing* 38). Leon Slowecki, the cultural attaché from the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, met Miller on March 27, 1983 and expressed his worry that due to Chinese theater’s use of simple messages, the play’s ambiguity would be lost on Chinese audiences. Slowecki went so far as to suggest that Miller provide “program notes that simplistically outline the story and how it is to be taken” because otherwise “all they’ll get is what the papers are going to tell them it means” (Miller, *Salesman* 52). Slowecki’s fear was representative of a larger American concern that Chinese theater was not ready for Miller’s *Salesman*.

Slowecki's fear was not baseless. Indeed, some government officials and left-wingers in China wanted to exploit the opportunity to attack capitalism by showing that, although there was materialistic abundance in capitalist societies, people were spiritually devastated (W. Wu, *Kua Wenhua* 43). Some people in America shared the exact same feeling when the play was staged in America in 1949; a woman on the opening night, for example, was outraged, calling the play "a time bomb under American capitalism." Arthur Miller's response was: "I hoped it was, or at least under the bullshit of capitalism, this pseudo life that thought to touch the clouds by standing on top of a refrigerator, waving a paid-up mortgage at the moon, victorious at last" (Miller, *Timebends* 184). When Columbia Pictures filmed *Salesman* in the early 1950s, the studio asked Miller, before releasing the movie, to sign an anti-Communist pledge for the American Legion, "lest it be picketed" (Stross x). Miller, a lifetime *anti-anti-Communist*, refused (x).

However, some Chinese feared *Salesman* would be "a different kind of propaganda" (Miller, *Salesman* 45). They worried the superior living conditions—such as having a refrigerator, a car, and a house—of the common man in America would have a negative impact or weaken the power of social criticism because, at that time, refrigerators and cars were extremely luxurious items to possess in China, even for rich people (W. Wu, *Kua Wenhua* 43). Ying concurred with the statement above. He said that, from an orthodox Chinese viewpoint, Willy's lifestyle seemed extremely rich. Struggling people like Willy should not have a refrigerator, much less different kinds of cheese to eat. A colleague warned Ying: "you'd better be careful. Don't make the house look

magnificent” (A. Zhang).

Skepticism was abundant throughout the production, with “Americans [suspecting] the tragedy of serving Communist propaganda [and] Chinese [distrusting] innovation for the sake of art” (Lord). Ying, Cao, and Miller were well aware of the political complications, and they resisted any explicit political interpretation of the Beijing *Salesman*. When the media asked why the Beijing People’s Art Theatre chose to stage *Salesman* in particular and “whether China [was] planning to use it to blacken the name of American society,” Miller responded that “the play’s universality is its best protection against political exploitation” (Broder). Miller also commented: “I hope that the production here of this very American play will simply assert the idea of a single humanity once again” (Miller, *Salesman* 44). On a different occasion, Miller elaborated:

The whole world has a problem with how authority can serve the people without wasting a human being... What the play is doing is dealing with the question of the contemporary man’s inability to find some meaning in his existence. It’s true in Sweden; it’s true in England; it’s true in the United States; and I think it’s probably true here. (Broder)

Ying echoed Miller by stating the play had a common, human emotion shared by everyone. Yet Ying also emphasized the Chinese artists’ interest in the play was purely aesthetic, saying, “I think it can open new territory to our own playwrights, since it does break out of the conventions that by and large have held us back” (Miller, *Salesman* 45-46).

In the midst of the ongoing controversy, Miller suspected the possibility of the

Chinese government using the play as an attack on capitalist society. In contrast, his Chinese artists saw such political interpretation as “inevitable”. After the Xinhua News Agency published a critical description of *Salesman* in April 1983, Miller wrote in his diary:

Xinhua has published a narrow description of the play as a condemnation of monopoly capitalism, period. But the actors and others around the theatre seem totally undisturbed, dismissing this as inevitable and as something nobody reads but foreigners and newspapermen. In any case, I sense I am being shielded from this ideological conflict; everyone around the production wants the play to be received and felt as a human document applicable to China. And that is how Ying Ruocheng is trying to sell it to the reporters and politicians, I think, in order to keep it from becoming a political bone of contention. (Miller, *Salesman* 103)

Compared to Miller’s outrage, it is clear from the passage above that his Chinese collaborators were “undisturbed” and “dismissive,” having predicted this outcome. If the play’s “universality” was a shield for Miller against political exploitation from China, the “inevitable” ideological conflict worked as a shield for Chinese artists eager to secure freedom in art in order to explore innovative forms. Even though the political constraints theatre experienced under the Gang of Four had mostly passed, Chinese theatre was not entirely free of political influence. In 1982, a top party official, Zhou Yang, told dramatists to feel “bound by duty to support socialist ethics by giving people positive, lasting encouragement through their artistic productions” (Wren, “Theater”). Ying echoed this sentiment, saying in the same *New York Times* article that while artists no longer felt a “remnant fear,” this fear was not entirely “gone” (Wren, “Theater”). The

political message of *Salesman*, as echoed favorably in the *Xinhua News Bulletin*, gave Chinese artists cover to explore deeper themes in the work. American media saw the successful run of *Salesman* as a positive signal that the Chinese government had “opened the door a little further to experimentation” (Wren, “Theatre”). Such experimentation went far beyond innovative staging and acting. *Salesman*’s emphasis on the individual was especially notable so shortly after the Cultural Revolution, when “Chinese authorities [had] cracked down hard on individual expression in the arts” (Broder).

Taiwanese media correctly suspected that China might not let the production be staged at all. The story of “a man made superfluous under capitalism would appeal to China’s cultural commissars;” however, “there was still apparent hesitation about allowing in *Death of a Salesman* and its flawed hero” (Wren, “Willy”). Willy Loman is “deluded, but also heroic” (Cohn 192). He loves family, his sons, and his wife. He is willing to sacrifice his own life in exchange for a better future for his sons. On the other hand, he does “everything that a self-respecting revolutionary cadre would not do:” he lies, brags, cheats on his wife, commits fraud, and kills himself (Wren, “Theater”).

Another issue with the production of *Salesman* was how to treat the character of Charley. A scholar who studies Miller questioned at the time whether this play would have more profound significance without the character Charley because Charley was “too kind” to be a capitalist (X. Zhu 210; W. Wu, *Kua Wenhua* 43). Zhu Xu, the actor who played Charley, recalls how CBS asked him if he thought Miller made *capitalist* Charley “too good,” with an intentional emphasis on the word “capitalist” (X. Zhu 210). Because

“such a loyal friend could not have been a capitalist,” Charley had become a “worker” instead of a “boss” on stage in the Soviet Union (B. Guo 255). After this type of alteration, it is no wonder the Taiwanese press said that “Cao Yu and Ying Ruocheng must be crazy to think they will be allowed to do *Death of a Salesman* in Beijing, let alone have Miller admitted to direct it” (Miller, *Salesman* 45).

In the communist drama tradition, there historically had always been a conflict between the Good People (the Marxian elect) and the Bad People (the dissidents and subversives, intent on undermining the system) (Houghton). As the famous playwright Jin Shan shared with Miller during his first visit to China:

Jiang Qing’s aesthetic—which, you understand, was rigidly enforced in all art forms—required that there be Three Prominences in any revolutionary work. There had to be a Bad Element, who is actually a spy or agent of imperialism, a group of worker-peasant heroes or Number Two Heroes, and finally a Number One Hero, or Hero of the Heroes. The Number One Hero, of course, can have no inner conflicts, no personal weaknesses, and naturally no character. (Miller and Morath 19)

According to Miller’s account, the capitalist Charley and the salesman Willy are not very different from each other: they “are [both] of the same class, the same background, the same neighborhood,” and have similar aims. The only difference is that “Charley is not a fanatic” (Miller, *Collected Plays* 37). The duality of similarity and disparity is part of Miller’s effort to reflect “a balance of the truth as it exists” (37). It gave rise to a “muffled debate” to “justify or dismiss the play as a Left-Wing piece, or as a Right-Wing manifestation of decadence” (37). Miller himself gave an account of how

Salesman was interpreted in vastly different ways in different countries, depending on the socio-political environment:

In one periodical of the far Right it was called a “time bomb expertly placed under the edifice of Americanism,” while the *Daily Worker* reviewer thought it entirely decadent. In Catholic Spain it ran longer than any modern play and it has been refused production in Russia but not, from time to time, in certain satellite countries, depending on the direction and velocity of the wind. The Spanish press, thoroughly controlled by Catholic orthodoxy, regarded the play as commendable proof of the spirit’s death where there is no God. In America, even as it was being cannonaded as a piece of Communist propaganda, two of the largest manufacturing corporations in the country invited me to address their sales organizations in conventions assembled, while the road company was here and there picketed by the Catholic War Veterans and the American Legion. (Miller, *Collected Plays* 27-28)

Miller saw this irrational behavior of the movie producers as a sign of fright; he said, “fright does odd things to people” (28). However, after years of persecution, the fear in the heart of Chinese artists was mostly gone, as Ying said in an interview in 1983 with *The New York Times*. Ying continued, “Chinese theater has emerged from the shadow of the Cultural Revolution—though hardly from all political constraints” (Wren, “Theater”). Chinese artists were ready to take risks by producing an ambiguous play like *Salesman* in a now more tolerant environment.

“Willy was a refreshing change,” Ying said about the novelty of “[the] flawed hero” in an interview (Wren, “Theater”). He said when the audience “see[s] the main character, they expect him to be a goody-goody,” but Willy “does everything wrong and you still end up loving him” (Wren, “Theater”). Miller believed part of the reason the

Chinese artists wanted to bring *Salesman* to China and have him direct it “was to show an ambiguous situation on the stage, one in which the audience would find itself understanding and even sympathizing with a man who is not particularly ‘Good’ or moral. In short, to let the real world into Chinese art” (Houghton). Miller had the impression the Beijing People’s Art Theatre artists “had long and strenuous debates about [*Salesman*], and those who backed the idea [had] a lot riding on it,” which was partially why Miller wanted to do it (Wren, “Willy”). While there is no evidence that Miller and his collaborators ever discussed Miller’s choice of hero, Willy’s nature as a flawed hero influenced Chinese decisions to stage *Salesman* in Beijing.

A Risky Choice

The Beijing People’s Art Theatre’s decision to stage *Salesman* shows that there had been significant change in the policy and artistic sensibilities in this premiere Chinese theatre (B. Guo 246). “With the import and impact of contemporary Western plays, Chinese artist-intellectuals wanted to seek more artistic autonomy” (Ou and Qian, “Death” 61). As Belinda Kong, an Asian literature scholar argues, “the Beijing *Salesman* was part of an attempt by certain Chinese artist-intellectuals to navigate dangerous political waters” (40). Kong continues: “The Beijing *Salesman* [was] first and foremost a Chinese event, and, more spectacularly, it [was] but one act in a lived national drama, staged between artist-intellectuals and party leaders, begun long before Miller’s arrival”

(38). Miller knew the Chinese artists who had invited him to produce *Salesman* in Beijing were “desperate to at last break out of this kind of bone-dry liturgy masking as drama,” yet Miller wondered whether “they themselves [were] cured of their lifelong habits of obedience to political demands made on their art” (Miller, *Salesman* 95).

During the rehearsal process Miller felt “a struggle going on” within the Chinese artists to “free themselves as well as the audience” (95). However, this was not the first time Miller witnessed such a struggle. When Miller delivered his critique of *Cai Wenji* in 1978, he unwittingly criticized the work of Guo Moruo⁵, perhaps best known for writing plays with explicit political messages and subsequently loved by Communist Party officials. Cao, the director of the Beijing People’s Arts Theater, pushed Miller to critique Guo’s work in front of a room of Chinese actors and theater officials after Miller attempted to remain diplomatic. In both Miller and Ying’s accounts, this candor resulted in a slight pause. However, it appears that Miller did not interpret what Ying referred to as an “awkward silence” as a politically significant action (Ying and Conceison 159). In Miller’s account, this silence is referred to as a mere “split-second,” which when compared to Ying’s account hints that Miller did not notice the seriousness of the convention he was encouraged to break (Miller, “In China” 115). In Ying’s telling it is emphasized as an example of Miller’s fresh perspective that challenged Chinese norms

⁵ It is worth mentioning that Guo Moruo was very well regarded among Communist Party cadres because of his loyalty to the powers-that-be and his ability to quickly change opinions when the political wind shifted. However, he did not enjoy of the same esteem in the eyes of Chinese intellectuals, including Cao and Ying—the latter saying, “I never liked the man” (Ying and Conceison 159).

about drama. In China, all critics were political in spirit; this was still the case in 1983, as Ying noted (Wren, “Theater”). As such, Miller’s candor when pushed to speak the truth was well received because it critiqued a playwright who was famous for writing art for political reasons. Cao’s decision to break the “awkward silence” served as an endorsement of Miller’s views, giving permission to other Chinese artists to publicly follow suit (Ying and Conceison 159).

Chinese artists had already been reflecting on the role of theatre and its relationship with authority. Ying said: “It is the most useless kind of theatre person who would make it the theatre’s job to support political theatre—and yet this is precisely what we artists in China had been doing since 1942 at least” (Ying and Conceison 154). Meanwhile, Cao Yu had pondered about this relationship between theatre and authority as well. A couple days before the opening of *Salesman* in Beijing, Cao read to Ying and Miller a long letter written to him by his friend, the painter Huang Yongyu. It said:

My dearest and oldest friend, as I love China so I love you and must therefore tell you the truth. As an artist and writer, you were an ocean once, and now you have become a trickling brook. When will you cover our pages with grandeur again? Everything you have written since 1942 is of no truth, no beauty, no use. What has our country done to your priceless talent, and what has she done to deserve to lose it? (Miller, *Salesman* 225).

Miller was confused why Cao would share with them such a scathing critique, one that accused Cao of having become a servant of the regime. Miller was even more astonished with Cao’s comment after reading the letter: “The truth! This is the work of a real friend! Absolutely true!” (227).

When the Beijing People's Art Theatre took the *Death of a Salesman* production to Hong Kong in 1985, Ying Ruocheng and Zhu Lin publicly stated numerous times that Chinese art was experiencing a huge transformation and that freedom of creation was fast approaching (B. Guo 256). Ying's remark at a press conference in Hong Kong provide an appropriate snapshot of the fast-changing viewpoints of Chinese theatre both towards defining the role of art and towards the pursuit of artistic freedom experienced in the 1980s:

In the past, if one of our plays didn't please anyone's eye, they could condemn us in the newspaper as they wished. Worse still, we were even required to clarify where we stand. Recently, however, when someone did condemn a play we staged written by a new writer, we just ignored it and continued our performance. Not only that, we are now writing a collective response to fight back. We are planning to send our response to the Art and Literature Journal. Let us see if they will publish it⁶ (B. Guo 257).

The Chinese theatre was indeed transforming, as shown during the production of *Salesman* and thereafter (B. Guo 257). In pondering the relationship between art and authority, Miller said, "The theater is a public art, one of the first things to feel the underground trembling of society because we reach the public directly... Authorities always are afraid of the theater. But we've been here a long time, and we'll go on a long time, I think. I hope" (Broder). Miller's Chinese collaborators agreed with this, although they were probably unwilling to say so openly.

⁶从前我们的戏，人家不喜欢，就能在报上写文章批。还要叫我们表态。最近我们演了一个新作家的戏，有人不高兴了，在文艺报上批。我们不管照旧演，现在我们还在组织文章，打算进行反批评，而且还要投去文艺报，看他们登不登？

Chapter IV

Willy Conquers China

At some point in our milling around for our last farewells, for what reason I have no idea, I felt a kind of despair; maybe it was a fear that when all was said and done I could not know what I suppose I had come here to find out—what my play really sounded like to the Chinese, and what in their heart of hearts these actors had made of it. In a word, the old opacity of “China” was once again descending over my vision. I know the audiences laugh in just about the same places as we do in the West, and I have seen many of them weeping for Willy, so maybe my questions don’t matter.

(Miller, *Salesman* 254)

After six weeks of intense rehearsal, Miller and his Chinese cast were ready to bring his 1949 story of the failure of the American dream to life thirty-four years later in communist China. On opening night, May 7, 1983, “a sellout crowd” was outside of Capital Theatre in Beijing (“Willy”). Influential figures from both China and the U.S. attended the opening. Michael Parks, one of many reporters present that night, detailed how “dozens of China’s leading writers, actors, artists, musicians and other intellectuals,” including Cao Yu, were present. Miller recorded that “American friends and the

American Ambassador, as well as other ambassadors and high officials” were also sitting among the packed Chinese audience (Miller, *Salesman* 248). A few “foreign journalists and correspondents—as well as the more prominent media and theatre critics of Beijing” were also in attendance (Ying and Conceison 166). The composition of the audience showed “how magnified this project’s importance [had] become” (Miller, *Salesman* 248); however, many people in the audience had “never seen an American play, much less heard of Miller’s play” (Broder). Questions and skepticism were still abundant in the air. A CBS program from 1983 captured this atmosphere of uncertainty, asking: would the Chinese audience relate to Willy’s uniquely American dream? Would Willy be a mere symbol of capitalistic decay to a Marxist audience? Would an audience which had spent the last decade watching nothing but the eight highly stylized revolutionary operas appreciate the contemporary artistic forms of the play? (“Willy”).

The Every Man

According to Miller’s account, Ying became tense as opening night approached, for he obviously had much at stake. He was the “main force behind the decision to select this play and [have Miller] as its director” (Miller, *Salesman* 170-171). Miller was also anxious. According to Ying’s recollection, Miller was so nervous on opening night that the cast could not keep him in his seat. Ying noted that “[Miller] was running around the theatre trying to listen from all angles, gauging the reaction of the audience—to discern

whether they were laughing at the right places and silent at the right places” (Ying and Conceison 167).

Anxiety peaked with the play ended. Ying’s memoir recorded the moment the curtain fell:

As the curtain came down, there was absolute silence from the audience for what seemed to us like a long time. One of our actresses starting sniffing, thinking that the show was a total failure. And then, all of a sudden, I don’t know who started it, but it came like an avalanche: the applause came forth, and it didn’t end. Everyone was cheering. I was relived and excited—all of that effort had not been in vain. Nobody in the audience was concerned about [missing] the last bus⁷. Instead of running out of the theatre as some of my colleagues had predicted, the audience rushed forward to the edge of the stage, shouting and pointing. (Ying and Conceison 167)

Several accounts recorded how audience members, Chinese and foreign alike, were moved to tears by the play: “People cried unashamedly” (Wren, “Theater”); a large number of them “blubber[ed] into their hankies” (Ying and Conceison 166); and some foreign audience members’ eyes were “red and wet” (Miller, *Salesman* 252). As Brenda Murphy, who studied various productions of *Salesman* abroad, writes, the “universal indicator of a successful production of *Salesman*” on opening night was a tearful audience, “[sitting] for a long moment in awed silence and then [acclaiming] the play in

⁷ Ying, in his autobiography (Ying and Conceison 166), recalls how his colleagues were concerned that Willy Loman's death would be regarded by the audience as the play's end—since it was highly unusual for a play to have a requiem—and people would possibly leave early. There was also the issue of the play being much longer than normal plays and possibly ending after the last bus had stopped running, at around ten o'clock in the evening. This would have left most of the audience either stuck at the theatre without transportation or forced to leave before the end of the play, just after Willy's death.

swelling applause” (Murphy 107). All of these signals of success—the tears, awed silence, and tremendous applause—appeared in the Beijing production.

In the end, there was no need for Miller to have worried at all; the production was “a total success” (Ying and Conceison 166). As Miller described it, the audience reaction in Beijing “was little different than audience reaction had been in New York City and in theaters in any other Western city” (Miller, “Death in Tiananmen”). What the Chinese audience thought was more or less the same as what others had thought in the Western world, that “being human—a father, mother, son—[was] something most of us fail at most of the time” (Miller, “Salesman at Fifty” 467). Even the eulogy Charley delivers at Willy’s funeral—“Willy was a salesman... a man... riding on a smile and a shoeshine”—had the same catchy effect on the Chinese audience as it did earlier on the American ones, as exhibited through a reporter’s account that Chinese students were quoting the eulogy, along with other lines, as they were leaving the theatre (Parks).

Several recorded interviews with audience members on opening night affirm that not only did the audience understand the play, they also identified with it profoundly:

“I know a lot of people in China who are like Willy Loman. There are many people and many families here that are just like those depicted on the stage tonight” (“Willy”).

“It is Chinese. Except for the dress and names. It’s all Chinese” (Parks).

“Like Willy Loman, we Chinese are anxious for our children's success; like Willy Loman, we are disappointed when our dreams fail, and like Willy Loman, some of us see suicide as the best way out when life gets to be too much” (Parks).

“The play shows that any human being can be confronted by the problems Willy Loman has. It doesn’t matter whether you live in a socialist society or a capitalist one” (“Willy”).

Given that, as Miller once said, “the Chinese [were] practically the inventors of the family,” most Chinese could easily see themselves in the familial situations described in the play: love and friction between father and son, failure to prevent loved ones from killing themselves, and so on (Broder). In fact, to Miller’s surprise, the Chinese actors were able to absorb what he thought of as typical American situations very early on during the rehearsal process (Miller, “Unlocking” 6). For example, Zhu Lin, who played Linda, was quoted as saying: “Haven’t we heard enough of how parents pin their hopes on their children, and when the children fail, say, in college entrance exams, they maltreat their own flesh and blood?...That is why we can understand the feelings in the play” (“Arthur Miller Says”). Miller found out during rehearsals that “Willy’s desire to see his son Biff triumph on the field” was identical to how “every Chinese father wants his son to be a dragon,” a Chinese idiom that equates being a dragon with being successful (Miller, “Unlocking” 6). Despite cultural differences on the surface, Willy is “as Chinese as you can get. He’s a papa” (“Arthur Miller Says”). Interestingly, Inge Morath shared with Dustin Hoffman a conversation she had with a tearful Chinese woman after the opening night performance. Inge asked her, “Why, is your dad like Willy Loman?”, and the woman responded, “No, my *mother* is like Willy Loman” (Biggsby, *Arthur Miller and Company* 71).

Parents, whether Chinese or American, could see themselves in Willy’s desire to

see his children succeed. Ying noted that, at the Beijing production, “a lot of older people were dragged to the theater by their children and told, ‘you are treating us in the same way as Willy Loman treated his children’” (Wren, “Theater”). Allegedly, similar scenes occurred in U.S. theatres too when the play was staged there (L. Zhu, “Zai” 188). Such distinct parallels are abundant among various productions of *Salesman* across time and location. Theater critic and director Norris Houghton asserted the audience’s response to the Beijing production, as detailed in Miller’s journal *Salesman in Beijing*, resembled the 1960 performance in Leningrad, where the audience had also ignored ideology and had focused on the play’s humanity, specifically on the relationship between fathers and sons (Houghton). David Mamet, after seeing the *Salesman* production on Broadway starring Dustin Hoffman as Willy, told Miller he found it strange that he felt as though he was watching his own story—a story about his father and him. Miller responded to Mamet that that was the same comment a Chinese audience member in Beijing had made to him (Bigsby, *Arthur Miller and Company* 64).

An English professor in the Beijing audience asserted that the traveling salesman in capitalist America, Willy, became a “modern every man” to communist China (Parks). Other audience members shared similar comments. Ying recalled how some who had watched the rehearsals had recognized the value of Willy and the ubiquity of Willy Loman in China (“Willy”). As Miller emphasized numerous times, the play shows the one humanity shared by all. During rehearsals, both Miller and Ying strove to find the common ground between American and Chinese cultures. The identification and

acknowledgement of this common ground and common humanity stretched the importance of this production far beyond merely its theatrical success (Miller, *Salesman* 241). At opening night this goal was realized, with Ying noting that:

I saw the future of mankind—that we can communicate—not only intellectually, but emotionally. What we proved was that as far apart geographically and historically and in so many other ways as are the Chinese and the Americans, we are one humanity. (Ying and Conceison 157)

The Message

In the attempt to make the production both about and for “every man,” Miller made sure his Chinese cast understood the play was written for everyone, not bound just to America, describing their goal as making the play “a non-national event” (Miller, *Salesman* 155). He also asserted that the play was not just about a traveling salesman. As Miller explained in an interview, “the salesman part is what he does to stay alive. But he could be a peasant, he could be, whatever” (qtd. in Bigsby, *Arthur Miller and Company* 205).

Miller was successful at ensuring the audience did not focus on Willy’s profession or his nationality. This success, partially due to the specific historical context of the economic reforms following the end of the Cultural Revolution, resulted in a number of differing interpretations of *Salesman* among a Chinese audience, including a surprising affinity for Willy among younger audiences. In the eyes of the Chinese audience, the

“every man” Willy was not only a father and a husband but also a “dreamer of the dream” that they aspired to achieve (Miller, *Salesman* 245). A young Chinese man, who spoke English, told CBS reporter Bill Moyers the following:

Man: I believe it—the message is that this person or Willy is really in a kind of dream, the American dream, [the] old traditional American dream that anybody can be president. And you’re—you can—if you try hard, can always be number one.

Moyers: And what are your ambitions? What are your dreams? Do you see anything of Willy Loman in yourself?

Man: I also want to be boss, a big man, powerful and rich—all the things. I don’t think anybody who can help not to dream. (“Willy”)

Ironically, this young, Chinese man who dreamed of becoming rich and powerful, agreed with Willy more than Willy’s own sons. This young man’s desire was not an isolated case. The play was produced at a new time in China: The country had begun to encourage profit-making, and the Communist Party was beginning to “support and protect those who [became] rich through hard labor and scientific knowledge,” as Miller observed during his stay (Miller, *Salesman* 125). Before arriving to Beijing in 1983, Miller assumed that Chinese audiences would not identify with Willy Loman, who “had sprung out of a world of business ambition,” embodying values that Miller thought would strongly contradict those typically found in a Communist country (Miller, *Death of a Salesman’ in Beijing* xxxviii).

However, once in China, Miller began to notice hints of the reaction to come. In his journal entry dated April 2, 1983, Miller wrote that he had seen newspaper reports of

“individuals who [had] set themselves up in small businesses and [had] succeeded in making it big.” Miller also noted a story from *China Daily*, where a countryside entrepreneur, who quit his city job to sell chicken, stated, “I intend to make it big, and there is nothing wrong in this because I am working for my money and providing value and service” (88-89).

These newspaper reports confirmed the desire of Chinese individuals to pursue wealth and social status at the time of the production. Miller sensed a similar attitude among his cast members during rehearsals. When he “described Willy’s sons as narcissists who could not delay gratifying whatever urges they felt” (Stross xiv), Miller felt he hit a nerve with the actors and realized it was not yet the time “to identify a common enthusiasm for life-improving goods and inventions with narcissism” in China (Miller, *Salesman* 131).

While one might have initially assumed the opposite, Chinese youth thought “Willy was right and Biff was wrong in [their] argument about the economy and about life” in *Salesman* (Biggsby, *Remembering* 292). They thought Willy was correct in saying “everybody wants to be Number One Man,” while Biff “[was] like the Cultural Revolution” (Biggsby, *Remembering* 292). Such audience reaction coincided with what Li Shilong, the young actor who played Biff, said to Miller: “[Biff] sounds like a Cultural Revolutionary. He is absolutely against the profit system, against competing with people, against asserting himself” (Biggsby, *Remembering* 292). In fact, Willy’s yearning for riches and fame made him better connected to the youth of China because of their shared

desire.

Yet at the same time, it seemed the older generations identified more with the generational gap between father and son. When Ying and the cast discussed the ways in which the audience might connect with the play, Ying said most Chinese people in the audience “[had] no hopes of becoming rich or famous themselves, they [were] ordinary men and women. But this gap in the play—this generation gap—they [could] identify with, it is absolutely Chinese” (Miller, *Salesman* 131-132). Clearly, Ying did not think Chinese audiences would have the desire to become rich or famous like Willy. While his remarks might have been true for people of Ying’s generation, it is not what the young Chinese were thinking at the time. Ying, like many others, did not realize that a greater generational gap in Chinese society was under way between the older generation, bound by their socialist upbringing, and the liberalized, new generation seeking to make a name for themselves. This generational gap, beyond father and son, was growing rapidly in the 1980s, as young people felt empowered to pursue dreams like Willy’s dream for himself and for his son, of being rich and powerful. This is a dream that most Chinese people still embrace to this day.

The future Willy signaled to was a future that Chinese youth at the time wanted to embrace. They, like Willy, did not know what a better future would look like, but they could not help dreaming about it. To clarify his thoughts on Willy's role, Miller told his cast Willy “[was] a walking believer...trying to lift up a belief in immense redeeming human possibilities” and “forever signaling to a future that he [could not] describe and

[would] not live to see, but he [was] in love with it all the same” (49). Miller never expected his work would end up “sending a message of resurgent individualism to the China of 1983,” especially given that many thought the “revolution had signified...the long-awaited rule of reason and the historic ending of chaotic egocentricity and selfish aggrandizement” (Miller, *Timebends* 184-185). As Miller explains below, young Chinese audiences loved Willy because of “what he wanted”—to be meaningful and worthwhile (184). Miller continued:

The Chinese might disapprove of [Willy’s] lies and his self-deluding exaggerations as well as his immorality with women, but they certainly saw themselves in him. And it was not simply as a type but because of what he wanted. Which was to excel, to win out over anonymity and meaninglessness, to love and be loved, and above all, perhaps, to *count*. When he roared out, “I am not a dime a dozen! *I am Willy Loman, and you are Biff Loman!*” it came as a nearly revolutionary declaration after what was now thirty-four years of leveling. (Miller, *Timebends* 184)

The message of “one humanity” that he and his Chinese collaborators strove to send to the Chinese was shown clearly through the lens of family emotions. What’s more, to Miller’s surprise, the Chinese also uncovered in the play a message of individualism and a validation of the individual’s desire for power and wealth, especially for the younger generation.

Miller had the impression that, in China, there was a message in everything. He once said the first thing Chinese people asked him about was always “what’s the message?” (Wren, “Willy”). Even though Miller did not approve of the idea of constantly searching for political messages in art—he and his Chinese collaborators tried to

downplay them—a political message came through in *Salesman* nevertheless. However, the message the Chinese audiences received was not the exact one the government censors intended. In a 1983 interview with *The New York Times*, Ying acknowledged the Chinese censors had allowed *Salesman* to be put on stage in Beijing “to limn the cruelty of American capitalism” (Wren, “Theater”). As mentioned earlier, in the news bulletin issued by Xinhua News Agency on March 21, 1983 announcing the news of Miller’s arrival to direct his play, Willy was described as “a weary figure, loyal to a company which eventually makes him its victim” (“Arthur Miller Arrives”). A youth newspaper characterized Willy as “the inevitable result of the contradictions of capitalism” and warned its readers not to be “fooled by the bright lights” of the West (Parks). The *Guangming Daily* reported that the play had been the target of attacks from the right in the U.S. when it was first staged there in 1949 (Parks).

Such ideological interpretation was not limited to the Chinese media. Critics, some audience members, and even actors in the cast also felt that way. Theatre critic Wang Zuoliang remarked that Miller was showing that the American social values represented by Willy were reaching their end. According to Wang’s view, the cruel reality that Miller exposed was the true side of capitalistic society, and the cruelty would not end until capitalistic society had been extinguished (Z. Wang 6-7). Another critic, Zhang Jianzhong, similarly said the message of the play was that the American dream needed to be smashed and the capitalist society behind it invalidated in order to realize the individual dignity of someone like Willy (Ke 248). Two of the main actors, Ying and

Zhu Lin, pointed out that Miller had been avoiding answering questions directly regarding the political message in the play, and they thought this play had an exceptionally obvious political stance from both their reading the lines of the play and from their interactions with Miller during rehearsals (Ying, “Rang” 44; L. Zhu, “Yici” 194). For example, Zhu saw a political message in the lines where Willy and Linda are discussing Willy’s frustration with the presence of planned obsolescence in American goods and Willy says, “I’m always in a race with the junkyard! I just finished paying for the car and it’s on its last legs. The refrigerator consumes belts like a goddam maniac. They time those things. They time them so when you finally paid for them, they’re used up” (Miller, *Death* 52-53). In her opinion, the lines above expose the poverty and crisis underneath the superficial appearance of wealth in capitalist society (Y. Zhu 134).

Ying also saw something similar conveyed through the script. In the requiem at the end of the play, Linda tearfully delivers the following speech: “I don’t understand it. Why did you ever do that?...I search and search and I search, and I can’t understand it, Willy. I made the last payment on the house today... We’re free, we’re free... we’re free...” (Miller, *Death* 108-109). Ying commented on Miller’s subtle and skillful way of highlighting the message of the play. Instead of having Linda explicitly state the message, she repeatedly says she doesn’t understand, a technique which encourages the audience to search for the message themselves. The more Linda repeats that she does not understand, the clearer the message becomes to the audience. By the time she repeats “We’re free,” the audience has emotionally and mentally revolted against the social system that

devoured Willy (Ying, “Rang” 45). Zhu commented that Miller was wary of giving a direct message but did not avoid doing so entirely. She mentioned the only time Miller talked about problems concerning the social system was when the play addressed the consequences of the capitalistic social system. In her own opinion, Miller wrote this in a prosperous time when America was recovering in order to challenge the optimism that was widespread at the time (L. Zhu, “Yici” 193-194).

Indeed, it is clear Miller was well aware of the political message in *Salesman*; his concern was that the play was going to be used solely as political propaganda. When Willy “travels” abroad, he is more likely to be viewed as representative of all of America and its culture, unlike in the U.S., where Willy’s nationality would not receive as much of a focus. As Miller said in his journal, in China, Willy “apparently represents America somehow, or at least for some people” (Miller, *Salesman* 246). This is likely why Miller tried to avoid talking about the political message in the play. Both he and U.S.

Ambassador Hummel saw that such a political interpretation would be inevitable and feared that the play would “simply [prove] capitalism’s inhumanity and decay” (246). Miller discussed this with Hummel just after arriving in Beijing. The ambassador gave Miller the following advice: “Don’t pay any attention to it; nobody does. The play is a portrayal of tragic elements in American society. So what?” (246). Hummel and Miller were in agreement that it would be best to admit the pitfalls of American society rather than attempt to merely show its bright side (246). By taking such a risk and preparing for undesirable interpretations, Miller, as an influential figure in the American theatre world,

and Hummel, as America's representative in China, were confident enough to publically address through *Salesman* that the weaknesses of America and how America's ideology had changed since 1949, when the play was first staged in America with so much controversy.

Miller and the American media were happy to see, as it turned out, that *Salesman* was not interpreted in China as just an attack on American capitalism, which could have been the case had it been performed at an earlier time (Bigsby, *Arthur Miller, 1962-2005* 321). As Ying said in an interview with CBS, there may have been "a handful of people" in the audience who were looking for a political message in the play, but "99.9%" of the audience was simply absorbed with Willy and the story ("Willy"). A young Chinese man who saw *Salesman* on opening night enjoyed the play very much. He told an interviewer, "We have very few dramas like this, and none of this intensity. We are very big on politics, the problems of the society, on history and so forth, but very rarely does one deal with the problems of the person, of the individual in society" (Parks). This remark suggests Chinese audiences were ready to watch morally ambiguous plays "without the customary Marxist moralistic didacticism," which was a great leap towards cross-cultural understanding (Wren, "Willy"). As Bigsby rightly claimed, "a new kind of theatre had been introduced into China" (Bigsby, *Arthur Miller, 1962-2005* 321). This accomplishment of performing *Death of a Salesman*, a play focused around the American dream, in a way that allowed Chinese audiences to strongly connect with it was enormous, especially considering China's isolation from the outside world and its strained relations

with the U.S.

The play's overwhelmingly positive reception proved even more remarkable amidst tensed Sino-American relations. Two weeks into rehearsal, the U.S. granted political asylum to Chinese tennis star Hu Na. In retaliation, China canceled all cultural and sporting exchanges with the U.S. for the rest of the year. Suddenly, there was a very concrete possibility of Miller's play not being staged at all. However, this crisis was averted, as Miller's project was not sponsored directly by the U.S. government (Broder; Cohn 191; Wren, "Willy").

Because of the ambiguity of the play and the awkward relationship between the U.S. and China, the "absence of political posturing about the play by Chinese officials" came as a surprise ("Arthur Miller Says"). Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, Chinese artists were supposed to be "beholden to the Communist party. Dramatists [were] bound by duty to support socialist ethics," as a top cultural commissar, Zhou Yang, affirmed (Wren, "Theater"). Miller recalls how several Chinese journalists who had attended a "press run-through" of the play before the official opening were reluctant to publish their reviews because they worried the play might later be condemned by the Chinese government (Miller, *Salesman* 171). Miller took Chinese authorities permitting *Salesman*'s staging as a "terrifically good sign," and he also rejoiced in the fact that the Chinese audience seemed ready for "new stuff beyond plays that corroborate some Marxist position" ("Arthur Miller Says"). As *New York Times* journalist Christopher Wren argued, the success of Miller's play in Beijing "testifies to a greater leeway given

by the party and the ministry of culture” (Wren, “Theater”). Wren believed *Salesman* “opened the door a little further to experimentation even though theater, like art and literature in China must foremost serve socialism” (Wren, “Theater”).

The Pride

Salesman triumphed in Beijing, and “laughter and tears [flowed]” (Lord). The success of the production exceeded everybody’s expectations. Miller rejoiced, “this is everything I had hoped for and more” (Parks), while for Ying, the enormous applause at the end of the performance was “the moment [an actor] lives for” (Ying and Conceison 167). The popularity of the show is demonstrated by the fact that *Salesman* enjoyed a run of shows that was second only to China’s “own beloved classic” play, *Teahouse* by Lao She (Lord).

Miller proudly announced on opening night to the assembled actors “I think we have done it” (Parks). All parties involved in the production shared in Miller’s excitement and showed their pride for this accomplishment. Ying had a “tremendously serious victory on [his] face,” as did Cao and others. The Chinese audience was “showing its pride in the company” (Miller, *Salesman* 251-252). At the end of the show, it was evident Miller’s play brought gratification and pride even to the Americans in the audience, including Ambassador Hummel and notable New York banker, Teddy White, who “could be the prideful American he wanted to be” that evening (253). Even before the start of the

show, Americans sitting among the Chinese audience were beaming, according to Miller's observation (250).

Yet, the American and Chinese reasons for being proud were not exactly the same. Americans viewed the success of the play as proof that American art could succeed worldwide, no matter the location or cultural barrier. For the Chinese, the pride came from having successfully demonstrated to themselves and to the world that their actors were able to stage an innovative American play that many, including themselves and Miller, had doubted was within their reach; the Chinese audience's ability to assimilate an alien play, the likes of which they had been deprived of during decades of isolation; and the Chinese theatre's readiness to participate in the world theatre once again. Chinese critic Liu Housheng commented that this production, due to its superb staging, directing, acting, and translation, was a significant gift to Chinese audiences (H. Liu 234). Wang Zuoliang stated that the success of the *Salesman* production "told the world: the Chinese translators have vision, the Chinese actors have ability, the Chinese audience also has the spirit of a sensitive and broad artistic taste and can enjoy all the best plays the world has to offer"⁸ (Z. Wang 8). Two other Chinese critics remarked that "the production of this play in Beijing broke the prejudice of Western media on the Chinese people's appreciation of theatre"⁹ (Wang and Ren). After all, one of the reasons Miller delayed his decision to stage *Salesman* in Beijing was due to his lack of confidence in the Chinese

⁸五月的北京舞台上演这个剧本告诉世界: 中国的翻译家有眼光, 中国的演员有本领, 中国的观众也有心灵上的敏感和广阔的艺术趣味, 容得下也欣赏的了世界上的一切好戏。

⁹ 打破了西方媒体对中国人戏剧鉴赏力的偏见

audience's ability to appreciate this supposedly culture-bound play (Miller, *Death of a Salesman* ' xxxviii). Miller's initial concern was shared by many: as Miller himself later recalled, "There was a lot of skepticism surrounding the project, with many Chinese and foreigners doubting that the Chinese audience would understand the very American play" (Miller, "Death in Tiananmen"). Ultimately, Chinese artists welcomed the production's success and acclaim as proof that Chinese actors and theaters could take part in a global dramatic community.

Just as how his Chinese collaborators used the success of the play to advance the cause of China, Miller's desire to see the play succeed was partially rooted in his identity as an American playwright in a foreign land. First, Miller was instrumental in making the Beijing production possible. As Ou Rong and Qian Zhaoming recall, "When Miller accepted the invitation to Beijing, he was filled with a sense of mission and superiority to promote Chinese theatre" (Ou and Qian, "Death" 71). In Miller's view, the Chinese actors were "really coming out of a cave and blinking their eyes" (Wren, "Willy"). He spent six weeks painstakingly "cajoling, educating, and finally electrifying" his Chinese cast in order to bring out their talents that had been shed away during the Cultural Revolution. Second, to see his play warmly accepted in China, whose culture differed greatly from his own, was gratifying. In fact, the success of the Beijing production was viewed as "the most pointed affirmation of the play's broad cultural appeal" (Schlueter 158). Miller attributed the warm audience reception in China to the common humanity conveyed in the play. He also thought the fact that Chinese actors had no trouble

connecting with the play was due to his use of “a universal, emotional language” in the play, in contrast with Wang’s assertion that the success of the play was due to the skill of Chinese actors rather than the text (“Willy”). Third, Miller was especially proud that the power of his play reached far beyond the Western theater arena. His play, *Salesman*, became the only American cultural contact with China at an awkward moment of badly strained U.S.-China relations (Miller, *Salesman* 250).

Many Americans shared in Miller’s pride in the success of *Salesman* in Beijing. Hummel, who was known for his imperturbable manner, excitedly yelled to Miller, “It comes over in Chinese!” (252). The Americans saw the success as a victory of their culture conquering China. The cross-cultural event attracted much major media attention. For that reason: *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *Washington Post* all had coverage of the production. It is worth mentioning that the even titles of some of these articles revealed their sense of victory and conquest: from *The New York Times*, “Theater in China opens some doors”; from the *Los Angeles Times*, “‘Salesman’ Opens Door to Hearts of Peking Audience”; and from *The New York Times* again, “Willy Loman Gets China Territory.”

Confident in the success of his play, Miller decided to “wear a shirt and tie and a blue blazer” on the opening night “to reassert [his] real identity as a Westerner” instead of his worn off bush jacket (Miller, *Salesman* 245). When he joined his Chinese collaborators and cast on the stage for the curtain call, they all received well-deserved appreciation. While the cast and collaborators were as proud as could be for having

accomplished this seemingly impossible task together, the Chinese and the Americans sent separate messages to the world. For the Chinese, it marked a beginning of growing confidence in rejoining the global theatre. For Americans, the production signaled the power of American art to penetrate even the seemingly most distant of cultures.

This formidable undertaking of cross-cultural exchange was possible because both China and the U.S. had been opening up and softening their stances on government control of art in the past decades. This production was certainly a bold step for China, and if it had happened at an earlier time, Chinese authorities could have easily prevented it or framed it purely as anti-American propaganda, as the Soviet Union did in 1959. It is also worth mentioning America was also not what it used to be in 1949, when the play was first staged. In the early 1950s, the U.S. Department of State denied Miller a passport to travel to Belgium and attend the opening of *The Crucible*. By contrast, on the opening night in Beijing, the Department of State was grateful for his play to connect China and America (Miller, *Salesman* 250). Miller himself noticed the potential for this connection on opening night, writing that positive reaction to the play was an instance of “Chinese and Americans alike...trying to assure each other of the durability of both countries’ affection” (Miller, *Salesman* 251-252). By facilitating a “non-violent contact and mutually respectful dialogue” between U.S. and China when a formal channel was not possible, *Salesman*’s success confirmed the power of the play and the power of theatre (Kong 37).

Chapter V

Miller and the Common Man

We laugh at the same jokes; we cry the same tears; and we all love Arthur Miller.

(Ying and Conceison 157)

Our discussion in the previous chapter begs two important questions: (1) why was Arthur Miller, a controversial American playwright, chosen to be a model in the search of a new uniquely Chinese theatrical form? and (2) why was Miller so successful during the 1980s, a time of incredible flux in China? The examination of such questions furthers an understanding of the production's impact on the evolution of Chinese theatre in general. I argue that the positive reception of Miller's work in China during that special historical period is the result of similarities between Miller's views on the role of theater, preference for tragedies involving the common man, and political beliefs and those of the Chinese theater.

Miller's anti-capitalist views helped him gain favorable reception in China. Much of what made Miller so well received in China was due to the fact that Miller had been consistently viewed as an anti-capitalist—essentially a communist supporter—in China.

Influenced by Marxism in his early years, Miller was an outspoken opponent of McCarthyism, as demonstrated in his allegorical play *The Crucible*. For his persistence against the unjust treatment by the House Un-American Activities Committee and their investigation of his ties to communism, Chinese critics praised Miller as a “hero” (D. Dong 67) and a “fighter” (Ke 196). Referencing Miller’s resistance against anti-communist activities, a Chinese critic told Miller bluntly in person in a roundtable in 1983 that: “We really admire what you did and your fight against McCarthyism and the coercion you suffered from the government” (X. Zhang 5).

Miller was also seen as a communist sympathizer or even believer, to some extent. In fact, Arthur Miller himself said: “I had indeed at times believed with passionate moral certainty that in Marxism was the hope of mankind and of the survival of reason itself, only to come up against nagging demonstrations of human perversity, not least my own” (Miller, *Timebends* 407). Seen here, Miller’s political views at the time stemmed from a belief that Marxism could be a way for his vision of humanity to prevail. This was in contrast to the Chinese view that Marxism was a political philosophy rather than a means to an end. In fact, it is fair to say that Miller was not an anti-capitalist, but rather an “anti-anti-communist,” as Stross put it (Stross x). Even though most Chinese were aware that to label him as a “Marxist” was a stretch, they argued that since he was a “progressive writer” who believed in social justice and humanity, his views made him a “natural friend of Marxism,” as opposed to most other Western playwrights (Ke 245).

As Miller observed, people in China have a “fine zeal for symbolic political

interpretations of art” (Miller, “In China” 112). As such, his plays, *Salesman* and *The Crucible*, in China were viewed by the Chinese audience as an attack on capitalism and the American government; however, Miller argued that to view a play as “the objective work of a propagandist is an almost biological kind of nonsense, provided, of course, that it is a play, which is to say a work of art” (Miller, *Collected Plays* 38). Miller viewed politics as an essential part of theater but not as its only purpose (J. Guo, “Fang”, 40).

As Miller said in his meeting with Chinese playwrights in 1978, “The difference between Chinese playwrights and American dramatists around that time is that the Chinese were trying very hard to defend and confirm what the government advocated, whereas the Western playwrights tended to attack the notions their government or rulers promoted” (Su 119). Although coming from opposite extremes of motivation, one to defend and one to attack their respective mainstream cultures, Chinese artists and Arthur Miller still found a common platform on which to converse, despite Miller arguing that plays should be used for broader societal critiques rather than critiquing a specific party or government (B. Guo 255). Miller viewed this as common convention among playwrights, citing Shaw and Ibsen, the favorite playwrights of Chinese theatre. Plays might contain political critiques, but “the vaster part” of what a writer creates is “subjective and not within his intellectual control” rather than an attempt at propaganda (Miller, *Collected Plays* 37-38). In reflecting on his creation of Willy, he said his only interest was to bring out the truth, which is “much simpler and more complex” (Miller, *Collected Plays* 28-29).

Miller believed artists should not be bound by their political views. His personal experience in the 1950s made him a strong advocate for art and artists not being judged based on their political views but on their artistic merit. When the Taiwan National Theater produced *Salesman* in 1987, the director, Yang Shipeng, wished to use a Taiwanese translation instead of Ying's version preferred by Miller for artistic purposes. Yang gave no reason beyond an inability to use Ying's version in Taiwan, perhaps due to Ying's version's prominence on the mainland. Miller initially accepted but later insisted that Ying's translation be used, perhaps irritated that political concerns were informing artistic decisions. However, as a result, the Taiwanese press accused Miller of imposing pro-communist views on the Taiwanese production (Diamond 108). Before the Taiwan *Salesman*, Miller had similarly thrown his support behind Vanessa Redgrave, who lost her starring role in *Playing for Time*, a movie about the Holocaust, because of her public anti-Zionist views. Though Miller disagreed with Redgrave's views, he suffered due to his political views in the 1950s and consequentially argued artists should purely be judged on their merit (Gao 132-133).

Chinese artists saw value in Miller's ability to create art that had both artistic merit and a social message. Miller's art encouraged Chinese artists who worried that Chinese theater could not be exported due to its revolutionary nature (Ke 158) and showed that it was possible to attain success while using theater to carry a more meaningful message. Miller's use of social themes set him aside from other Western playwrights at the time and encouraged Chinese artists to bring their plays abroad (Ke

245).

Miller believed that art was a serious matter, not to be produced merely for entertainment or profit, and that the ultimate end of art was to voice social need. His view is exemplified by his dissatisfaction with Broadway, which in his eyes served merely to entertain. Broadway, according to Miller, was not serious theater, and he asserted that Broadway audiences would resent seriousness “when it threatened to appear on the stage” (Miller, “Salesman at Fifty” 466). On many occasions, Miller argued that the strength of Broadway discouraged him from writing more plays and that its influence was too strong on the world of American theater (Schleuter 156). According to a 2012 Chinese documentary about the 1983 *Salesman*, Miller’s disappointment with American theater partly drove Miller to come to China (“Renmin”). Miller’s view on the role of theater coincided with Chinese artistic theory in that period, during which the government promoted the idea that “Art should be subordinate to politics,” and later on in the 1980s, “Art for people and for society.” It is significant that one of Miller’s favorite playwrights, Ibsen, a realist writer who often challenged society’s problems, was also the most popular foreign playwright in China for many decades. Ibsen was viewed as a moralist in China, who wrote about social obligations at the center of his work (Han 69). While Miller said in an interview that he admired Ibsen, who “was up to his neck in the news of the day,” Miller never argued that he had a “moral obligation” as a writer, viewing his role as a sort of journalist (Lamos 44). Unlike Chinese artists, Miller did not see theater as “an educational institution,” rather preferring that a play help an audience to “feel more alive”

(Roudané 370). Miller hated Broadway, but he didn't want to be always writing about morals. Miller wanted to be an entertaining playwright whose plays grappled with serious morals. As a result, he lands in between the two poles.

In a collection of essays translated into Chinese, Miller further elaborated his views on the role of theater. Reflecting on what he thought to be a Chinese affinity towards strong messages in drama at the expense of entertainment, he critiqued Western artists for only valuing entertainment in dramatic works, which then lack profound meaning. (Miller, "Lunju" 141). Coinciding with Miller's observation, Chinese theorists at the time argued that, previously, theater needed a strong message to be great, which could then be elaborated using artistic tools (Ying, "Rang" 44). Following the Cultural Revolution, they argued that audiences were tired of direct messages from the stage and that great works of art were a synthesis of message and artistic merit rather than a servant of politics (44). These theorists cite the success of *Salesman* as proof that this ideal of synthesis could be attained (44). Meanwhile, Miller argued that politics is a component part of art, like air or sex, that is important but cannot be prioritized over other things (J. Guo, "Fang" 40). He went so far as to state that the value of theater, in his opinion, was that questions be raised, not themes supplied (Miller, "Lunju" 143).

One anecdote suggests that Miller's questions were well received by the Chinese audience. Zhu Lin, in her memoirs, recounts meeting a young, lower-class worker who managed to attend *Salesman* three times in Beijing. This worker praised the production, saying that each time she saw it, it became more interesting. In her view, *Salesman* raised

many questions that made her ponder, due to the play's relatable characters and plot (L. Zhu, "Zai", 188). At least in the eyes of this one worker, Miller achieved his goal of making the audience think about his questions. His art challenged this worker to grapple with issues that she may not have normally considered, in contrast to the explicit morals provided by traditional Chinese theater.

Chinese people traditionally preferred tragedies over comedies (X. Zhang 4). Miller seemed to agree, arguing that tragedy is the "most accurately balanced portrayal of the human being in his struggle for happiness. That is why people revere tragedies in the highest, because they most truly portray us" (Miller, "Nature" 11). The Chinese people also appreciated the fact that Miller put ordinary men at the center of stage when the working class had come to dominate Chinese society in the late twentieth century (X. Zhang 4). Pictures of happy workers and peasants in heavy black outline, their costumes and flesh tones bright and optimistic, were everywhere in China in the 1980s.

For Chinese audiences, *Salesman* was the perfect tragedy. Audiences appreciated Miller's choice of Willy as a tragic subject, as his working-class background was well-suited to Chinese preferences at the time. Ying argued that one of *Salesman*'s defining characteristics was that "somebody unknown, even insignificant...is raised to such dimensions emotionally," which allowed the audience to identify with Willy and admire him "as though he were a prince" ("Willy"). Due to this, Ying viewed the play as having made a "great contribution" to Chinese drama ("Willy"). Ying's praise that Miller centered on Willy, a common man rather than a God or an Emperor as in classical plays,

as the focus of tragedy has been echoed by many including other actors and critics (L. Zhu, “Yici” 194; H. Liu 235-236; Z. Wang 7).

Miller preferred to depict the common man in his plays because he believed that the common man was as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were (Miller, “Tragedy” 3). Miller’s view of the common man was not exactly the same as how Chinese viewed it. A Chinese writer had the following conversation with Arthur Miller during an interview:

Guo: Who are the common men to whom you are referring?

Miller: Those who have no money, no social status, not well educated. They are not upper class, but they can be the subject of tragedy.

Guo: Are you referring to peasants, workers, and clerks?

Miller: Exactly.

Guo: Neither Presidents or millionaires are included, right? But people like Willy: He is a salesman, and he is at the bottom of society.

Miller: That is what I meant.

Guo: I agree with you very much. Tragedy should not only include the great deeds of kings and royals, but also the common men, who are the ones who deserve to be rendered much more....¹⁰

¹⁰郭：你说的普通人是指哪些人？

密勒：我是指那些没有钱、没有社会地位、没有受过良好教育的人。他们不属于社会名流，这些人能成为悲剧人物。

郭：你是指农民、工人和职员吗？

密勒：完全正确。

郭：不包括总统，不包括百万富翁，而是指威力洛曼那样的人，他是一位商品推销员，是处于社会最底层的人。

密勒：就是这个意思。

(J. Guo, “Fang” 42)

From this conversation, we can see that the definition of common man is not quite the same between Miller and Guo: The former viewed it as a social status while the latter viewed it more as a political class. Miller believed that common men are as deserving of attention as kings and royals of the past, while Guo says that common men deserve more than kings. Guo’s idea reflects the general Chinese perspective on this issue back then, given that the Communist Party was founded by people from humble class background, mostly peasants and workers, after thousands of years of imperialist rule. How much poor people suffered in the old society is a popular theme for Chinese art. Most works depicted how the workers and peasants struggled and suffered under the past feudalist regimes or under the Kuomintang rule before 1949. In fact, for Chinese people, *Death of a Salesman* is a play about these suffering, ordinary men with whom they can identify. As Zhu Lin, the actress playing Linda, remarked, “our lives are like Willy’s,” to which Ying Ruocheng, the actor playing Willy, added, “they (Willys) have no hopes of becoming rich or famous themselves. We are such ordinary men and women” (“Ta shan zhi shi” 42).

郭：我很赞同你的意见，不仅写国王和贵族的业绩，更应当写普通人...

Chapter VI

Willy's Footprint

Many viewers had said that for the first time “it made us feel like *them*,” meaning Westerners. If this turns out to be the case for the audiences in the future, it alone will justify the production of *Salesman* here, at least for me. It can really open the world repertory to China, not merely as a curiosity, but as an experience in which they can participate, and one that would do much to penetrate their isolation as a culture, a major accomplishment whose resonances can roll out in many surprising directions.

(Miller, *Salesman* 233)

Miller's Beijing production of *Death of a Salesman* impacted Chinese theatre in a number of ways. The production introduced a fresh acting and staging style for foreign plays in China (Ou and Qian, “Death” 71) and spurred the development of innovative translation techniques for foreign plays. Furthermore, Beijing's *Salesman* inspired young Chinese playwrights to explore other new play forms and new themes, stories, narrative structures, and character development (Ying and Conceison 161). At the same time, Chinese artists gained a greater appreciation for traditional Chinese arts (G. Wu, “Ying”

55). Lastly, I contribute to the existing scholarship that the production's success confirmed that Chinese artists, in their quest for a contemporary Chinese theatre, could learn from foreigners.

Miller introduced a radically new approach for Chinese actors playing foreigners. According to commentators, such as Li Shilong, who played the role of Biff, this approach "became the model that subsequent productions of Western plays at the Beijing People's Art Theatre followed" (Miller, *Death of a Salesman' in Beijing* xvi). On March 21, 1983, the first day of rehearsals, Miller made it clear to his cast that one of his primary motives for traveling to Beijing was to "try to show that there is only one humanity" (Miller, *Salesman* 5). Miller believed that to uncover the "one humanity" beneath different cultural surfaces, the actors must stay "emotionally true to the characters and story" (5). In addition, the play must be localized. He directed his cast to "not attempt to act like Americans at all," for in his view, localization ensured the play's genuineness and authenticity. As Miller put it, "to make this play most American is to make it most Chinese" (5). Miller's insight was that while American and Chinese cultures appeared different, many aspects remained the same below the surface. To help the actors get into their roles, Miller used parallels to uncover the commonalities American and Chinese share. For example, when his actors failed to understand why Happy mentioned West Point in his pursuit for a girl's attention, Miller asked what lies a Chinese man would tell to impress a girl. His actors responded that he would lie about having a father living in Hong Kong. By explaining American terms in Chinese conventions, Miller

could uncover similarities between the two cultures in allowing the actors to better understand the motivations of the American characters (Miller, *Salesman* 126).

As a first step toward the play's localization, Miller announced that "there [would] be no wigs" (5). The actors laughed aloud, mistaking his statement as a joke. Before the production of *Death of a Salesman*, everything an actor did in a foreign play had to seem foreign ("Renmin"). The conventional pidgin model of staging meant actors dressed like foreigners, spoke like foreigners, and behaved like foreigners. (Wen and Xu). In fact, Miller's request not to use wigs came from his observation of this convention at the foreign plays he had seen during his previous visit to China. His distaste for the gaudy makeup and acting techniques was evident in his journal:

I recall a couple of plays about Westerners that we saw on our last visit to China, in 1978, and how appalling it was to see actors made up with chalk-white faces and heavily "rounded" eyes, walking with heavy, almost loutish gait as they think Europeans and especially Russians do, and worst of all, wearing flaxen or very red-haired wigs that to us seemed to turn them into Halloween spooks. (Miller, *Salesman* 5)

Not surprisingly, Miller's decision was met with resistance by his Chinese cast. Theatre critic Brenda Murphy stated that the "Chinese actors felt naked on stage without heavy make-up and wigs" (122). Such conventions used to portray foreigners were not unique to Chinese theatre at the time. As Houghton said, Chinese theatre "considered that blond wigs and elaborate makeup to turn yellow faces white were as essential to a portrayal of Westerners as a New York cast called upon to portray an Asian family would doubtless think it necessary to don straight black wigs and turn their round eyes almond-

shaped” (Houghton). Theatres across the world used exaggerated physical appearance to represent people from other cultures, whether well intentioned or not, but the end product, as Ying commented, resulted in a bad caricature and a loss of genuineness (Ke 118-119).

With Ying’s help, Miller finally convinced the cast to break out of this convention by stressing the importance of the inner world of the characters rather than their physical appearances. Miller said that “we wanted audiences to know the pulse of [the characters’] heart, not the color of their hair” (Ying and Conceison 164). Miller won this battle, and in doing so, changed the way Chinese theatres have staged Western plays ever since (Miller, *Death of a Salesman’ in Beijing* xix). Audience responses confirmed Miller made the right decision. Many viewers said that, for the first time, a foreign play made them feel like Westerners (Miller, *Salesman* 233).

Miller’s desire to localize *Salesman* also led him to encourage his cast to avoid thinking of their characters as foreigners in the performance. He directed the cast to focus on internalizing American characters rather than imitating them (Miller, *Salesman* 5). For example, “Mi Tiezeng, the actor who played Happy in the Beijing Production, [recalled] that Miller continuously encouraged him not to imitate a foreigner, but told him to ‘act [himself]’” (Miller, *Death of a Salesman’ in Beijing* xv). Since then, many foreign plays staged in China have successfully adopted staging and acting styles that focus on localization and internalization. For example, five years after the 1983 Beijing production of *Death of a Salesman*, Ying and Zhu Xu, the actor who played Charley, staged American playwright Herman Wouk’s *The Caine Mutiny* at the Beijing People’s Art

Theatre. By adopting staging and acting styles similar to those developed during the production of *Salesman* (Yang), *The Caine Mutiny*, too, was a massive success.

Finally, Miller urged his actors to break from “the highly stylized, melodramatic acting of the traditional Chinese theater” that was influenced by Chinese opera, to emphasize the real, human aspects of each character (“Arthur Miller Says”). Miller spoke about the limitations he perceived in melodramatic, traditional Chinese acting style:

The wooden inflexibility of such melodramatics can never succeed in portraying the complexities of human life, whatever the society, and one has finally to judge it as an insufficiency of imagination and a failure to confront experience. The melodramatic urge is basically an authoritarian one in art, as it tries to command what the viewer is to make of what he sees rather than give him choices as to what things really mean. (Miller, *Salesman* 94-95)¹¹

To successfully convince his actors to break free of their ingrained habits, Miller urged them “to play these parts as they’re written in the play...Don’t try to manipulate the audience” (“Willy”). Breaking out of this convention was not easy to achieve, as China had been in turmoil since the 1940s and not yet had the opportunity to modernize Chinese acting (“Arthur Miller Says”). Even the most famous and well-respected actors, such as Zhu Lin and Ying Ruocheng, struggled with this during rehearsals. After the production, Zhu Lin, Zhu Xu, and Ying Ruocheng each wrote essays about the challenges they experienced how they eventually rid themselves of their formalized, mechanical

¹¹ Miller himself noted that his views on melodramatic acting were perhaps not entirely justified, later writing that: “I must keep correcting my prejudices toward melodramatic acting; Chinese people do have a habit of nodding over-emphatically when agreeing with something, especially with something funny. There is a danger I will tame their native reality to make it confirm to mine” (Miller, *Salesman* 150).

acting style and stereotypical representations (Ying, “Tan” 189; L. Zhu, “Yici” 196; X. Zhu 214).

Thus, the Beijing production of *Salesman* developed a new staging and acting style for the production of foreign plays in China. According to Ying, “the best result is when [a] play is performed and after five minutes the audience forgets about the actors’ appearance and ethnicity” (Ying and Conceison 163). In the case of *Salesman*, Miller concluded that “the Lomans were [seen as] a second-generation Chinese family in Brooklyn,” proof of the successful internal characterization of *Salesman* (163).

Audiences and critics also approved of this style shift. Theatre critic Wang Zuoliang, for example, was averse to watching Chinese actors portray foreigners or foreigners portray Chinese characters because of the exaggerated caricatures. However, shortly after the show started, he became utterly absorbed; the acting, make-up, costumes, and line reading all seemed convincingly natural (Z. Wang 6). Ying stated in an interview that forgoing assimilation of physical appearance brought the audience closer to the characters on stage (Ke 119). Miller himself believed that making the world theatre repertory an “experience in which [the Chinese audience could] participate” was one of the crowning achievements of his visit (Miller, *Salesman* 233).

In addition to launching a new acting and staging style, the Beijing production introduced a new performance-oriented way of translating foreign plays. Fearing the existing Chinese version of *Death of a Salesman* was not tailored to stage performance, Ying Ruocheng undertook a new translation faithful to the original, as requested by

Miller, deviating only by “[eliminating] several lesser-known place names” (Broder) and avoiding literary language so as not to “sound [too stiff]” (Ying and Conceison 162).

Ying’s translation amazed Miller. The playwright told a reporter from the *Chicago Tribune*, “I can follow it, line by line...and know exactly where the actors are at every second. That can only be because the rhythms are the same. It’s probably going to sound in Chinese very much the way it sounds in English for English-speaking people” (Broder).

Ying’s command of both the English language and Chinese literature, as well as his extensive knowledge of Chinese and American cultures, was crucial to his successful translation; even Miller once said in an interview with Bigsby, “[Ying] knows more English than I do” (Bigsby, *Remembering* 290).

Ying’s translation convinced Miller that the message of “common humanity” would come across in the play. It became “a renowned case study in Chinese-English drama translation” (Miller, *Salesman’ in Beijing* xiv). When Miller timed the play with a stopwatch, the translated version was the exact same length as the English one, and Miller could follow the play completely, even though he did not speak Chinese (Yuan 104). In his autobiography, Ying recalls he accomplished this task by “maintaining the original tempo of the dialogue” to preserve the feeling of the original play, and by reconstructing a language that “would have been spoken in a crowded Chinese city at the end of the 1940s,” which seemed to him the closest equivalent to Miller’s intentions (Ying and Conceison 162-163). For example, to translate the line “Business is business,” a phrase without any meaning in Chinese at the time, Ying translated it as “Kin is kin,

money is money,” a Chinese slang proverb, to vividly capture Miller’s intention while connecting with a Chinese audience (Miller, *Salesman* 240). Beijing’s dialect and slang words were also featured in Ying’s translation since the cast was from the Beijing’s People’s Art Theatre (Ying and Conceison 162). The Beijing *Salesman* audience was surprised to see that, for the first time, the language of a foreign play staged by Chinese actors did not sound affected and pretentiously foreign but rather genuine, earthly, and entirely alive (Wen and Xu). Miller called Ying’s translation “a work of genius” (Broder) and thought it so successful that he insisted it was the only acceptable translation to be used for a later production of *Salesman* in Taiwan (Diamond 108).

Beyond the ground-breaking translation, the Beijing production of *Salesman* served as a “catalyst for the sudden emergence of a contemporary spoken theater” (Chou). Chou Wen-chung, the head of the U.S.-China Arts Exchange and the individual who had convinced Miller that *Salesman* could be staged successfully in China, said that in the year following the production, more than 150 new plays were written in China. Chinese theatre scholar Han Dexing summarized the breakthroughs that Miller’s play introduced: “The structuring of time in the play, the development of character, the tension between inner psychology and outward action, between fantasy and memory, and the formal blending of realism and expressionism” (qtd. in Miller, *Death of a Salesman’ in Beijing* xiv). The *Salesman* production inspired young Chinese playwrights to explore these innovative forms in their work. Ying was instrumental in promoting the adaptation of these literary innovations in drama, and encouraged young playwrights to break from

former conventions. He recalled:

I was overseeing the playwrights at the theatre during the period following our production of *Salesman*, and I tried to encourage our writers to experiment with ideas like that—to break out of the old frameworks and stereotypes—and several writers were willing to try. (Ying and Conceison 161)

Jin Yun is an example of such a playwright. Shortly after *Salesman* in Beijing, he wrote *Uncle Doggie's Nirvana*, which later became a hit play. *Death of a Salesman* directly influenced *Nirvana's* structure, plot, and character development (Ying and Conceison 161). Theatre critic Wu Ge commented that *Uncle Doggie's Nirvana* and *Death of a Salesman* presented the contrast between “the Chinese Dream” and “the American Dream,” from two drastically different historical and social backgrounds, by using seemingly identical tools, such as character and character development, structure, plot, and artistic style (G. Wu, “Gour ye”). The two plays even end similarly, with self-destruction when the characters' dreams die: *Uncle Doggie's Nirvana* hints at suicide when Doggie throws himself in front of the fire, while Willy kills himself in his car (Ying and Conceison 161). *Salesman* also influenced other plays written in Beijing during this period, including *Death Visits the Living* from 1985 and *Chronicles of the Mulberry Village* from 1988 (Ou and Qian, “Death” 71). Meng Jinghui, a prominent contemporary playwright, was also influenced by the production. In an interview, Meng recalled that Miller's *Salesman* production was the first play he saw as a student, and that he was amazed by the genuine performance of the actors and the innovative form of the play. In

fact, Miller's play inspired Meng to pursue theatre and to eventually become a director (Wang and Meng).

Finally, the production gave Chinese artists a greater appreciation for traditional Chinese theatre and encouraged them not to forget to look within while searching outside. At that time, the standard practice for Chinese playwriting had been slavish imitation of foreign plays. Traditional Chinese theatre forms were criticized as naïve and obsolete and were thus abandoned (G. Wu, "Tuixiaoyuan"). Although Miller recognized the limitations of certain traditional Chinese theatre conventions while working with his Chinese cast, he was also open about his appreciation of traditional Chinese opera. Especially later on during the rehearsals, Miller found that the actors were more flexible than he had expected, and that even their melodramatic acting proved useful in some situations. The acting sometimes even exceeded Miller's expectations. For example, Zhu Lin's closing speech over Willy's grave moved Miller and his family to tears. He recounted, "The restraint, the purity of her concept of the woman, the valor of Linda and her anguish—everything comes together so simply, in such restrained elegiac lyricism that I cannot help weeping. I give her another big hug and kiss afterward" (Miller, *Salesman* 79). Moreover, the Chinese actors even rendered the characters closer to Miller's original intentions than other Western productions, including the original. For example, the actress Liu Jun, who played the Boston Woman who had an affair with Willy, played the scene of their encounter in a Boston hotel in a such an "un-American" way that "[Miller] [began] to reject it"; but this "beautifully naïve and chaste" way was

more erotic than the “more blatant rendering” of the scene in America (Miller, *Salesman* 151). Miller realized, after rereading his own play, that he “indeed had originally intended a hallucinatory surrealism which had somehow gotten lost in the various productions, including the original” (Miller, *Salesman* 151).

Miller’s appreciation of traditional Chinese opera served as a reminder for Chinese artists to reexamine the value of it in their own search for new theatrical forms. Both times he visited China, Miller familiarized himself with traditional Chinese opera by attending live shows, reading plays, and talking to artists. Zhu Xu and Ying noted that Miller spent a lot of his free time between rehearsals reading Yuan Opera¹² (Ying, “Xiang”; “Renmin”). He publicly stated that the operas and plays he saw in China left a deep impression on him, and that he enjoyed them more than he had anticipated. For instance, he once said, “Beijing Opera [possesses] a kind of sophistication most Western acting never touches” (Miller, *Salesman* 95).

Because of this fascination, Miller also adopted the techniques of Chinese traditional operas in his own plays after his first visit to China, most notably in *The American Clock*. In that play, Miller had the character Robertson introduce Quinn in the following way: “His name is Theodore K. Quinn, the greatest Irish soft-shoe dancer ever to serve on a board of directors. They know him at Lindy’s, they love him at Twenty-one.

¹² Yuan Opera, or Yuan Verse, is a form of Chinese drama, also known as “Zaju,” which provided entertainment through a synthesis of recitations of prose and poetry, dance, singing, and mime, with a certain emphasis on comedy. Originating in the Song Dynasty (960 AD - 1279 AD), it reached its peak during the Yuan Dynasty (1271 AD – 1368 AD).

High up on top of the American heap sits Ted Quinn, hardly forty years of age in 1932” (Miller, *Two Plays* 143). Having characters introduce their background and their relationship with other characters when they first appear on stage is a typical element of traditional Beijing opera, as Mei Shaowu pointed out to Miller at a round table with Chinese artists at the Beijing offices of *Foreign Theatre* magazine in 1983 (Mei, *Wo de fuqin* 114). Miller admitted that this was indeed inspired by Yuan Opera and not just a coincidence. He further added even the flashback in *Salesman* was influenced by traditional Chinese opera. Miller said:

I think the 13th century Yuan Opera is very modern and the most cinematic drama of all. Its flashback is faster than the film: once a character turns his back he can be back to one-hundred years ago. It cannot be denied that Western drama is influenced by traditional Chinese theatre. In *Death of a Salesman*, there is such a scene when Willy raises his hand he goes back to twenty years ago. (Miller, “Lunju” 144)¹³

Miller encouraged Chinese artists to look to their rich history of traditional opera as a source of inspiration. (Miller, “Lunju” 144). He said, “Chinese playwrights can liberate the playwrights of the entire world if they can grasp the gems of Chinese traditional operas throughout history.” He commented that the playwright Bertolt Brecht exemplified this liberation through his success, noting how Brecht “incorporated all the good stuff from China” (141).

On a few occasions, Miller commented on the many traditional Chinese opera

¹³密勒：是的。那是我看过元曲之后写出来的。我觉得 13 世纪的元曲非常现代化，是所有戏剧中最电影化的戏。它的倒叙比电影还快，一转身就回到了一百年前。不能否认，西洋戏剧受到中国传统戏剧的影响。在《推销员之死》中有这样一场戏，比利一抬手就回到了二十年前。

techniques from which modern drama could benefit. In Miller's view, traditional Chinese opera had value not only for playwriting but also for acting techniques, which could even be beneficial for actors in modern times. During rehearsals, Miller instructed the actors to employ traditional Chinese opera techniques when staging particular scenes in order to reach the desired effect (Miller, *Salesman* 107). For example, Miller documented the following incident during the rehearsal:

For two weeks I had been watching in slow agony Biff boxing with Uncle Ben upon the latter's challenging invitation, but at a loss as to how to give the fight some kind of conviction... Suddenly I recall the marvelous choreography of the Beijing Opera battles, where nobody loses his aplomb, nobody is actually hit, and yet the effect of battle is amply produced. "This is a dream," I say. "It is Willy's adoration of Ben's superhuman power. It is all magic! It is Beijing Opera!" (Miller, *Salesman* 105-106)

Inspired by Miller's instruction, the actors succeeded in putting on a much more artistic yet equally realistic fight without even touching each other. As Wu Ge described it, Miller was so familiar with traditional Chinese opera that he could use its ideas both when writing his own plays and when staging the plays (G. Wu, "Ying" 55). Miller made Chinese artists reflect on the value of traditional Chinese opera that had been abandoned by modern Chinese theatre (Ou and Qian, "Death" 65).

Miller's eagerness to learn from Chinese opera encouraged Chinese artists to acknowledge the need to learn from Western plays in order for Chinese theatre to achieve a brighter future (J. Guo, "Zhongguo" 60). Such a gesture is significant considering that China was just emerging from a period when any foreign contact could be interpreted as

treason, not to mention learning from foreigners. Ying published an essay in *Beijing Daily* in June of 1983, in which he made “the case that art should not be contained by national boundaries” (Stross xx). Traditional Chinese theatre, Ying said, did not belong to China alone, but belonged to the whole world (Stross xx; Ying, “Xiang”). Likewise, Western theatre also belonged to the whole world, including China. Ying encouraged Chinese playwrights to make incorporate foreign ideas into their works, drawing on the Chinese proverb: “Stones from other hills may serve to polish the jade of this one”¹⁴ (Stross xx). He continued: “Foreign culture is good not as an end, but as a means—to make China stronger, as a tool to polish already precious Chinese ‘jade’” (Stross xx)

Ying believed Chinese theatre should learn from all the great plays the world theatre offered. Staging the best foreign plays beyond classics like Shakespeare—also contemporaries like *Salesman*—would be extremely beneficial to Chinese theatre in its quest to reestablish itself (Ke 128). Miller’s thoughts resonated with Ying’s: the “contemporary repertory already familiar in the West [was] a good place for the Chinese theater to begin after the long years of isolation” (Wren, “Willy”). In the ten years following the Beijing production of *Salesman*, many foreign plays were staged in China, opening a window into international drama for Chinese audiences and sparking a golden age of global cultural exchange at the Beijing People’s Art Theatre (Wen and Xu).

¹⁴ 他山之石，可以攻玉

Chapter VII

Conclusion

But China is immortal and will go on winding its way across history, sometimes the world's wise teacher, sometimes its stubbornly ignorant and recalcitrant pupil. This production of *Salesman* happened by sheer chance to occur when the wave of hope was on a steep rise in China.

(Miller, *'Death of a Salesman' in Beijing* xxxv)

The historical background of Chinese theatre and its relationship with Western theatre traditions are critical to understanding the significance of the 1983 Beijing production in Chinese theatre history. In the round table discussion at Columbia University in 1980, Cao noted that Chinese drama had learned about drama from the outside world before. He argued that, in Japan in 1907, Chinese students had been exposed to a form of drama that, while “of the Chinese classical tradition” and with “roots in Chinese soil,” had several modern innovations (Shepard). Drama, a form of performing art that originated in Europe, thus took root in China. Modern, Western-style theatre in China is so young that Chinese artists often denote themselves as “students” (Ke 159). However, traditional Chinese theatre, Chinese opera, has a very long history

and is a source of pride for Chinese artists. Therefore, from very early on, “these Chinese ‘students’ were never content to be merely followers” (G. Wu, “Shouli”). Chinese artists had longed to find their place in world theatre. After the Cultural Revolution ended, they finally had the opportunity to explore their ideas once more. Stanislavski and other Russians, as well as Ibsen, had heavily influenced earlier, Western-style theater in China due to political reasons. Eager to break free from these already-familiar dramatic art forms, the Chinese turned to American dramatists for inspiration. The production of *Death of a Salesman*, then, was the result of such an exploration for a new, contemporary Chinese theatre.

A primary motivation behind the Beijing People’s Art Theatre’s decision to produce *Salesman* was to stage a play with ambiguous situations, rather than the simplistic messages that Chinese audiences were used to. Chinese artists’ bold undertaking of *Salesman* was their attempt to gain more artistic independence, drawing Miller to China in the first place in part to support this goal (Wren, “Willy”). As Ying said, “There’s never a lack of talent in China. It’s whether you have the right atmosphere, the right ambiance for the talent to emerge” (Wren, “Theater”). The absence of Chinese government intervention in the production was seen as a sign of the emergence of the right ambiance for Chinese theatre to thrive. For Ying and the Chinese artists, it was an indication that Chinese theater was moving from the shadow of pure, political sloganeering (Wren, “Theater”; B. Guo 256). For Miller and the Western world, this marked the beginning of Chinese theatre’s opening to the world.

The production's most significant impact on Chinese theatre, I believe, was boosting the confidence of Chinese artists eager to reenter the world theatre after decades of isolation. Artists and critics, both Chinese and foreign alike, were initially concerned about whether Chinese audiences would be able to comprehend a seemingly culture-bound play and whether Chinese artists, who had been trained in an unrealistic and melodramatic acting style, would be able to successfully stage such a different kind of play. There had also been some anxiety as to whether the Chinese government would allow *Salesman's* production, and if so, whether it would simply become anti-American propaganda.

As it turned out, none of these concerns became reality. In large part, this was due to the launch of China's economic reform at the time that provided relevant context for the Chinese audience to connect with the play. The audience not only recognized the intense family emotions in the play, but Chinese youth also perceived a message of individualism and validation of an individual's desire for power and wealth.

As a result, the production's success confirmed the abundant talents of Chinese artists, based on both the audience's enthusiastic reception, and more importantly, the playwright's own approval. With Miller's guidance, the actors successfully adapted to their roles after initially struggling to break free from conventional, Chinese acting techniques. They proved themselves to be as talented as their counterparts in the West. As Miller said, "it soon turned out that the moon is the moon and actors are actors, the same everywhere" (Miller, *Death of a Salesman' in Beijing* xxxiii). In the end, the actors

grew more confident in their own ability to portray their characters and felt encouraged to stage the show without depending on Miller's direction. On opening night, when Miller visited the actors in the dressing room before the show started, he reflected: "I am rather in a position of a beloved aunt who taught them as children to play the piano; they are overjoyed to see me, and to see me go" (Miller, *Salesman* 246).

To Chinese artists, the fact that the government allowed the project to begin, and to continue, was an encouraging sign of a new beginning of freedom of creation. The Chinese political environment had become more tolerant to allow such an ambiguous play to be staged with Willy, the flawed protagonist, and Charley, the ethical capitalist and a display of superior materialistic wealth that threatened to erode Chinese socialist ideals. Despite escalating tensions between the U.S. and China at the time of rehearsals, the government allowed the project to continue.

The successful production of *Salesman* not only boosted the belief that Chinese artists could succeed in their quest for a place on the world theatre scene but also gave Chinese artists direction on how to gain it. The Cultural Revolution cut off China from both its own past and the outside world, and this was especially true for Chinese theatre (Z. Liu 161). The Beijing production of *Salesman* provided a rare opportunity for Chinese artists to reconnect with both traditional Chinese and foreign theatre. Although Miller did not perhaps provide the final answer on how to produce the new form the Chinese were seeking, he did in many ways help Chinese theatre get closer to this synthesis by pointing out the value of Chinese operas in playwriting and acting as well as

the necessity to constantly learn from the great plays of world theatre, especially contemporary ones.

The ultimate goal for much of Chinese theatre's exploration of Western plays was to find new forms to integrate into its own vocabulary. In fact, this idea of synthesizing Chinese traditional forms with contemporary Western ones was not new to Chinese artists. Huang Zuolin, a famous film director, drama theorist, and educator, had already proposed a similar idea back in 1962 to merge Western drama and Chinese opera and produce a "dramatic form both modern and Chinese" (Hsia 231), "a Chinese contemporary, ethnical, and scientific dramatic system" ("Huang Zuolin"). He advocated for a new style of theatre "based on the four major features of the traditional Chinese theater... fluidity, flexibility, sculpturality and conventionality" (Bai 340). The new form of play, "Xieyi" or "Essentialism," a word Huang later invented (340), broke from mimicking life within the four walls (356). It is a "distinctly Chinese aesthetic," as it combined Stanislavski's realist acting techniques and Brecht's epic theatre approach with Mei Lanfang's Beijing Opera principles (Miller, *'Death of a Salesman' in Beijing* xxiv).

Huang's "Xieyi" was inspired by Bertolt Brecht's interest in Chinese opera. Brecht saw Mei Lanfang perform in a Chinese opera in Moscow in 1935, and, inspired by this, Brecht wrote an essay on Chinese opera. One year later, the essay was translated into English and was eventually studied carefully by a young Huang Zuolin, who at the time was a drama student in England. Literature scholar Adrian Hsia hypothesizes that Brecht's essay convinced Huang to pursue merging European drama and Chinese opera

after observing how a famous European dramatist highly appreciated Chinese art forms (Hsia 231). To promote his “Xieyi” theory, Huang encouraged Chinese artists to seek inspiration from traditional Chinese opera by capturing the essence, intention, and the spirit of things instead of their mere appearance (Sun and Gong 8). Unfortunately, with the advent of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, these explorations were forcibly put on pause, and they only slowly resumed after the Revolution ended. Huang’s “Xieyi” returned to the forefront during a debate on the Principles of Theatre that focused on the new direction of Chinese theatre that took place in the early 1980s. Therefore, the Beijing production of *Salesman* came at a propitious moment.

Interestingly, the essence of the production of *Salesman* has a lot in common with Huang’s “Xieyi” theory. For example, a main reason Ying and his company chose to stage *Death of a Salesman* was for its fresh, new form. “The walls didn’t exist for the people in the play anymore,” and Willy “could walk through any wall” (Ying and Conceison 160-161). This coincided with Huang’s advocacy for creating a new form of Chinese play by “breaking the walls” (Sun and Gong 7). Huang’s other idea—“in forsaking the [physical] form, one achieves likeness; in getting the meaning, one forgets the form”¹⁵—a feature in traditional Chinese operas (8), also resonates with Miller’s idea of focusing on the inner world of the characters instead of imitating physical appearance.

The production of *Salesman* was done in a manner similar to what is called for in Huang’s “Xieyi,” which emphasizes reassessing the value of traditional Chinese arts and

¹⁵ 离形得似，得意忘形

seeking inspiration from Western theatre amidst a search of a uniquely Chinese contemporary theatre form. The *Salesman* inspired play *Uncle Doggie's Nirvana* was seen as a step closer to such synthesis of traditional Chinese operas and modern Western theatre (Y. Wang).

At the end of the Beijing Production of *Salesman*, Miller said “America will be needing this country as an enrichment to our culture one day just as China needs us now” (Miller, *Salesman* 252). Many scholars rejoiced at Miller’s comments and viewed them as a sign that Chinese theatre would start to blossom again (J. Guo, “Zhongguo” 61). In his 1983 article “The first step of Chinese Drama into the world,” Ying commented that Chinese theatre had failed to make its voice heard in the world theatre due to lack of confidence (Ke 159). Miller made Chinese artists of the 1980s more appreciative of traditional Chinese opera and boosted their confidence in reentering world theatre. Recently, the Chinese theatre has again discussed how traditional Chinese opera has been valued in the West since the early twentieth-century. Chinese theatre critics were disappointed to find that modern Chinese artists neglected the value of traditional operas in contemporary Chinese theatre. As a result of such neglect, Chinese theatre is moving further away from the Western theatre and from establishing a truly Chinese contemporary theatre (Ni). Modern Chinese theater has come a long way, but it still has much further to go if it no longer wants to be a “student” of world drama. By revisiting the Beijing production of *Salesman*, this paper looked at the impact the production has made on Chinese theater. While further research should examine the progress of modern

theater, Beijing's *Salesman* has guided Chinese theater into modernity.

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