

SPATIAL CONSTRUCTION IN *SHANGHAI LADY*: A CHINESE ADAPTATION

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The cultural context plays a crucial role in shaping the text. This principle is peculiarly significant in the adaptation in the target culture, which can be exemplified in *Shanghai Lady* staged in China in 2009, an adaptation of Ibsen's *The Lady from the Sea*, directed by Shi Jun, an associate professor from Shanghai Theatre Academy.

First, what makes the adaptation possible is the common cultural ground shared by the two plays. In the original play, the time period is set at the end of the 1800s in a Norwegian town; while in the Chinese version, the time period is set around the 1930s in Shanghai. From the perspective of cultural geology, the two places of Shanghai and Norway, which are adjacent to the sea, are under constant influence of marine culture. Second, the two plays also share similar efforts of individual struggle against gender repression in two different cultures, restoring the ultimate significance of humanity in the macro-cultural background, reminding the world of the earnest endeavour for female freedom. As a metropolis next to the sea, Shanghai in the 1930s was the place which witnessed the conflicts among multi-cultures. During this decade, although feminine consciousness was beginning to rise under the influence of individualism, patriarchal domination still prevailed. Living in the metropolis of "Oriental Paris" and being encouraged by the May Fourth Movement, some well-educated females began to take on the fight, consciously or unconsciously, for feminine independence.

Thus, the ideological manoeuvres for feminine emancipation were highlighted in the two cultures. The period from 1915 to end of the 1920s witnessed the rise and popularization of Ibsenism in Shanghai, but only within the scope of male culture. It is not until the 1930s that Shanghai females were liberated in all dimensions, in terms of both ideology and culture, which is a crucially transitionally period of female consciousness from a traditional one to an independent one. Female stories in newspapers, magazines, dramas or films during that time, whether fictional or real, all indicated that everyone could become an "Ellida. The musical sticks to the eternal theme of Ibsenism: the freedom of pursuit and the freedom of choice. Besides, the characters not only have the freedom to make the choice, but also are responsible for their choices, which is highlighted by the director during the adaptation and serves as the potential common ground between the original play and the adapted one.

Yet, what makes the new adaptation interesting is the new perspectives and techniques that are applied. This adaptation is at first a peculiar cultural localization, introducing many Chinese elements, such as music, costume and stage settings into the original play. Compared with the original, the Chinese version has deleted some characters such as Lyngstrand and Hilde. The characters that are preserved are localized within the Chinese context. For example, the names of the characters are changed from "Wangel" into Fang Ziqing, "Bolette" into Fang Yuxi, "Arnholm" into Mr. Huo, and "Elida" into Eli, which helps to make the characters more acceptable and amiable to Chinese audiences.

Second, spatially speaking, it can be said that the earnest pursuit for personal

spatial expansion from the house to the wider outer public space represented by the sea is the theme highlighted both in Ibsen's *Lady from the Sea* and in *Shanghai Lady*. From the perspective of space, this article tries to investigate the efforts made by the Chinese director in reconstructing the female consciousness in the Chinese cultural context and approach the spatial renovation on two levels: textual space and the stage space.

I. Lyrics and dialogues: female textual space

The notion of textual space refers to the construction of female space in the text of the play, which covers the characterization, theme as well as the lyrics sung by the actors in the musical.

Influenced by Chinese traditional culture, the play has successfully adopted many traditional Chinese images to highlight the maturation of female consciousness. All through the performance, the play is accompanied by the piano music, which takes advantage of the singing in Chinese opera and highlights the nostalgic environment of the play. The lyrics, from poems written by famous poets such as Liu Bannong and Xu Zhimo,¹ were the popular ones in Shanghai during the 1930s; the nostalgic songs are varied from solo to duet and are also accompanied by artistic forms such as aria. It is both an invention in the adaptation in the artistic form and a reflection of the Chinese cultural features in shaping the female consciousness in the literary world.

Textually speaking, the lyrics and dialogues by the actress are the endeavor for the construction of female identity in the play. They are all parts of the effort to construct a textual space for female subjectivity, which is free from male domination and control. The lyric, for example, although does not occupy the textual center of the musical, it is the independent space for Eli to freely utter her voice and express the intricate and subtle feelings of the female. It is a space of self-sufficient female consciousness, a place of female subjectivity, which may be exemplified in the following lyric *If I Am Real* sung by Eli, the heroine.

If water may turn around,
 please take me along
 If water may stretch the arm
 Protect me from any harm
 Others may envy you
 Running with no bounds
 I want to be you
 Running to any place
 If water turns into me
 Free from any harm
 Others may envy you
 Running with open arm
 I want to be you
 Running around and around

¹ The two are famous pioneering modern poets during May Fourth Movement in China. Their poems are characterized by romanticism and eager pursuit for individual freedom.

If water may turn into me
 Tears will also flow down
 If I am the clear water
 I will never turn around!

Sharing similar water image with the sea, the intertextuality constructed in the lyric from *The Lady from the Sea* emphasizes the fluidity and vitality of the flowing water, with no intention of “turning around.” Different from Elida in the original play, who is eager to enter the male world of the sea in her search for freedom, Eli in *Shanghai Lady* has constructed her own female space of the water in which her subjectivity is self-sufficient. The lyric does not only reinforce the heroine’s female consciousness, but also endows her subjectivity with “a room of her own”, which paves the way for her later choice.

Also, the lyrics in the musical highlight traditional Chinese culture, which can be exemplified in the following lyric when Eli is sitting at Huangpu riverside.

Gaze with eager expectation
 I can not see your beautiful figure
 Deep into the night
 only the sound of the lonely goose is heard
 The warmth of past
 only wet my clothes with tears of sadness

I woke up from my dream
 Only wet my clothes with tears of sadness
 When will you come back
 my beloved
 When will you saunter through the woods there
 That gracefully slim tower shadow,
 Dotted with flying crows ,
 Still the old scene that very year

As a famous traditional poetry, the lyric dates from the ancient Chinese *Book of Poetry*, in which there are four famous lines:

"Fair, fair," cry the ospreys,
 on the island in the river.
 Lovely is this noble lady,
 fit bride for our lord. (Wu, 2007,1)

The two lyrics share similar female yearning to meet the beloved one in ancient Chinese culture. Yet, in *The Book of Poetry*, the text is a gaze from the male perspective and the female subjectivity is marginalized. While in the lyric of the musical, the perspective is shifted to the female one. The images and feelings in the poem all serve to highlight the female consciousness and construct the female space. This shift of perspective is crucial in carrying on Ibsen’s emphasis on female

independence while preserving native Chinese elements.

Also, ancient Chinese poetry highlights imagism and is impressionist in its portrayal. In the lyric, the lonely goose is a typical image in portraying the loneliness of the heroine and foreshadows her desire for freedom. The application of the image and theme of ancient Chinese culture has successfully portrayed the eagerness of Eli's desire for independence, and tinged the musical with more native Chinese traits.

II. Multiple-layered space construction as on-stage technique

Apart from the textual endeavor of spatial construction for female consciousness in its adaptation, the musical has also made much effort to construct the stage design in order to restructure Ibsen's works within the modern Chinese context.

Theoretically speaking, space is a systematic construction of metaphors and abstract definitions of social, ideological and cultural values. It highlights social, historical and cultural elements embedded in the landscape. There are varied treatments of this space in different cultures. In western philosophy, time and space are more of a physical nature; while in Chinese culture, the representation of space is dynamic and more of an impressionistic nature.

The notion of space in Chinese culture can be best seen in painting. The traditional Chinese painters do not observe from a single and fixed perspective. They try to include the multi-layered scenes before them on the two-dimensional space of the paper, which transcend the limitation of time and geographical space, turning the representation from a stationary exhibition into a dynamic projection.

Long since influenced by the imitation mode since ancient Greek times, the space construction on the western stage emphasizes the mirroring of the objective natural space, and it drives at representing that natural space. When it comes to the space on the Chinese stage, it can be said that it is not only the physical space where the characters live, but it's also a channel for the audience to explore the emotional and psychological activities. The symbols on the Chinese stage are highly impressionistic, which relies on the imagination of the audience and highlights the communication between the play and the audience. The "emotionally-built environment" practiced on the Chinese stage is first exhibited and expressed by the actors on the stage and then experienced by the audience.

It is in this sense that *Shanghai Lady* has inherited from the Chinese symbolic notion of space and makes itself concise and impressionistic on the stage. The simple equipment of chairs or lamp may serve as impressionistic symbols in reconstructing the old history. The symbolic technique has also been skilfully applied in the unchanged costume of the sailor during the ten-year period, which also symbolizes the complex haunting of Eli.

Traditionally, in a play, the transition among spaces and time within a single stage space can only be achieved through transition of acts. Yet, the limitation in its spatial construction hinders it from conveying more themes and multi-spatial information. With the help of techniques such as lighting and background setting, psychological and extended cultural spaces in the play can be shaped.

The multiple spaces, as the mode of space construction applied in *Shanghai Lady*, are characterized by one main space and the juxtaposition of two or more spaces on the stage, supplementing or echoing each other. The multiple-layered stage

design turns the stage from a flat space to one with multiple dimensions. The symbols on the stage are multiple in their connotations, both historical and psychological, and it is greatly beneficial for the representation of the psychological activities of the actors and advancement of the plot.

To be more specific, the local cultural space of Shanghai created in the play is exhibited in three layers: the outer layer, the inner layer and the extended layer. It can be generally concluded that the outer layer, a space signifying reality, comprises many cultural symbols, including the icons of daily lives, with peculiar Shanghai characteristics. The inner layer is a psychological construction of the emotional space in the play and the extended layer is of impressionistic nature that is characterized by the Chinese cultural feature of “abstract representation of the concreteness”.

In the outer layer, the background setting, shaped like a tree, is covered by the papers of *Friends* (since 1926), which are characterized by elegant modern ladies on its cover, and *Shenbao*, a famous local newspaper, symbolizing the glorious past of the old times in Shanghai. It does not aim to achieve a defamiliarising effect; rather, it applies the most familiar, daily and realistic symbols to represent the local culture of Shanghai in the 1930s.

Between the outer and inner layers, there is a translucent curtain, which serves as the separating line between reality and dreams. In the inner layer, the actors sing on the balcony, recalling the past, which constitutes a psychological space and serves to facilitate the mutual reactions between the emotions, thoughts and ideas of the actors and the objective world and exhibits them in a concrete manner in the theatre space.

At the beginning of the play, through the translucent curtain, the audience can see the heroine singing an old song on the high estrade. The inner layer helps to construct the past, through which the audience can see the distant bay and high estrade, which seems to be a historic memoir looming in the past. The nostalgic setting is in accordance with the technique of time machine in Ibsen's plays, which makes the plot more compact, dramatic and arouses the curiosity of audiences to keep watching on.

In the play, the curtain, set for the actors to perform in the illusionary space, has been ripped off two times, which is also one of the innovations of the adaptation. The stranger suddenly appears from beyond the ocean and stands in the face of Eli and violently strips off part of the curtain. This unexpected yet reasonable behaviour signifies the sudden intrusion of the past which lingers in the memory of Eli.

Psychologically speaking, the curtain serves both as a realistic division between the past and present and a psychological division between id and superego. The subjectivity of Eli is splintered between real life and daydream. When Eli swims in the sea, she is immersed in the power of the id. When she comes ashore, she has to face the realistic fact and discard the dream of id, restricting the impulses of id according to social custom and rules and repressing her inner desire.

With the advancement of the plot, the anxious Eli begins to tear off the rest of the curtain, which is symbolic of her intense psychological conflicts. The behaviour not only symbolizes the spiritual trauma, but also exhibits her courage in facing the dilemma, which marks the turning point of the musical. Before being torn off, the curtain is a fragmented spirit tortured by past memories; after that, it stands for the

firmness and resolution of the heroine.

Also, there is an extended layer of the sea, created symbolically by the heroine when she sits in the inner layer and gazes afar. The distance is of infinite size and widely extended with the singing of the nostalgia song, and is reinforced by the sound of the sea waves and seagull. The extended layer of the scene is of an impressionistic style which has always been popular in Chinese painting and theatre.

In terms of the construction of the space in the inner layer, the adaptation of Ibsen's play in the Chinese cultural context reconstructs the story from the psychological perspective; while in terms of the construction of the extended layer, the play has stepped further in its renovation of the Chinese cultural setting. The freedom in the space constructed in the extended layer lies in the traditional Chinese notion of "nothingness" and abstract nature of the reality, which is closely related to the inter-relationship between the play and the subjects, i.e., actors and audiences. Different from the "concrete" nature in traditional western theatre, the peculiar "abstract" feature shown in the Chinese adaptation is a metaphorical one which is mainly based on the psychological endeavour to make the "abstract" representation "concrete".

The application of the triple-layer scene has effectively foregrounded the conflicts of the heroine, and exhibited the struggle between past and present, passion and reason. The spatial arrangement is not only the artistic reflection of Ibsen's social drama, but also reinforces the realistic and sentimental atmosphere of the stage space, which serves as an organic combination of reality and fantasy.

It is at this point where the new version of the play pays attention to and distinguishes itself by. The play sticks to the theme of "free choice", highlighting Eli the heroine, while depicting the love between Mr. Huo and Fang Yuxi. Accompanied by a series of nostalgia songs and stage equipments, it has successfully applied the essence of Ibsenism in Shanghai, revealing women's vigorous efforts of pursuing freedom and gender revolution. The adaptation has vividly depicted the times of the 1930s while preserving the aesthetic connotation of the original play in terms of background and thematic exploration.

It is the first time that *Lady from the Sea* was rewritten in the form of a musical in China, which combines the essence of a musical and a stage play and brings a beautiful lady from Shanghai to the audience. With invention of Ibsen's play, the adaptation of *The Lady from the Sea* provides a new perspective to the later adaptations of foreign plays and stage performances, and injects Ibsenism with vitality.

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Summary

This article aims to provide spatial analysis of an adaptation of Ibsen's *The Lady from the Sea* and the musical *Shanghai Lady* staged in China in 2009 and directed by Shi Jun, a young Chinese associate professor from Shanghai Theatre Academy. The notion of space may be viewed from two perspectives: first, as a textual construction, it reflects the characterization applied and theme shaped by the director; second, as an on-stage theatrical technique, it conveys the director's understanding and innovative manoeuvre of adaptation in the target culture. The article tries to analyse the spatial renovation in *Shanghai Lady*, both in the text and on the stage, from the two perspectives mentioned above and aims to reveal the contemporary Chinese ideological reception of Ibsen's plays and the literary techniques exhibited in its adaptation.

Keywords

Ibsen, space, *Shanghai Lady*, adaptation