

IBSEN'S MERMAID IN CHINA: ADAPTING *THE LADY FROM THE SEA* FOR THE TRADITIONAL *YUE* THEATRE

Terry Siu-han YIP

Since the early twentieth century when Ibsen was first introduced to China, many of his plays have been performed on or adapted for the modern Chinese stage. However, adapting his plays for the Chinese traditional theatre has not been attempted until the past decade when *Peer Gynt* was staged as a Peking opera at the Opera and Drama School of the Shanghai Theatre Academy in December 2005, followed by *Hedda Gabler* which was adapted into a Shanghai *Yue* opera in 2006. In the same year, *The Lady from the Sea* was also performed by the Shanghai Yue Opera Company and a repeat performance was done in 2010 as a result of the Chinese enthusiastic response to the world's celebration of Ibsen's centenary in 2006 and cultural exchanges between China and Norway in 2010.

Ibsen has created Ellida Wangel in *The Lady from the Sea* as a "mermaid" stranded on land, feeling trapped in her marriage with Dr Wangel and suffocated by her restrictive gender roles as wife and stepmother. The play focuses on Ellida, the dying mermaid's process of individuation as she struggles to seek happiness, freedom and self-fulfilment in life. Through detailed delineation of Ellida's entangled relationship with the Stranger to whom she has attached her romantic dream in the past and her uneventful life with her husband Dr Wangel, whose presence reminds her of a life of domesticity characterized by subordination, duty and responsibility. Ibsen has drawn his audience's attention to the notion of the modern self with his discussion centring around gender relations, individualism, freedom of choice and liberation of the self.

It is interesting to note that when *The Lady from the Sea* was transported from Norway to China and adapted for the traditional Chinese theatre, in this case the Chinese *Yue* theatre, with the play undergoing a number of changes in order to suit the traditional *Yue* theatre goers' expectations and tastes, as well as to fit the socio-cultural norm of traditional *Yue* opera, which was founded in Shengzhou in Zhejiang Province in 1906 and has distinguished itself, since the 1930s, as a women's opera employing an all-female cast (Jiang, 2009, 5):

Yue drama is a soft and beautiful feminine opera . . . that is performed by women and is good at telling women's stories. It is women's favorite opera. . . . The fact that young male role is played by women determined that the main theme of *Yue* drama is the love story and soft beauty is its main style.

Instead of examining technical alterations such as rearrangement of scenes (Ye, 2011, 20), the use of symbols (Wu, 2011, 80), the setting (Wu, 2011, 78), or theatrical performance and devices (Qing Yun, 2010, 32) adopted in the Chinese operatic adaptation of *The Lady from the Sea*, this article will focus on the cultural re-presentation of Ellida the character to make her plausible as a Chinese woman appearing in traditional *Yue* opera. A close study of the cultural transformation of

Ellida and her re-orientation on the traditional *Yue* stage will enable the reader to better understand the Chinese cultural emphasis on didacticism, Confucian morality and propriety in traditional drama and theatre.

The Waiting “Mermaid” Settles Down to a Peaceful Life on Land

The *Yue* operatic adaptation of *The Lady from the Sea* tells a story of love and morality in chronological time and opens with young Lida waiting for her sailor-lover Jiang Siteng near the seaside. Different from Ellida, who enters the secret bond with the Stranger in a passive way, Lida in the *Yue* opera plays an active role in proposing a symbolic wedlock with her sailor-lover Jiang as a seal of her love before his departure. This slight change of the plot transforms Ellida from the passive “mermaid” waiting for her lover on land and yearning for the sea in the original play, to become Lida, the active free agent, taking the initiative in securing her love and happiness. The Chinese Ellida thus impresses the audience as a daring woman in quest of love and happiness. Her symbolic union with Jiang further places her amongst the Chinese tradition of virtuous maidens devoted to love. The theme of love and morality is established from the beginning through the bond and promise between Lida and Jiang, her sailor-lover.

Lida’s sense of morality is accentuated in the *Yue* opera as the audience is told that she has kept her promise and waited ten years with no news from her sailor-lover. Such a long period of waiting provides morally acceptable ground for Lida’s marriage to the widowed Dr Fan. As Lida justified her marriage decision, she is “losing her mind and could go on no more” after years of waiting:

My sailor fled from calamity,
Leaving me behind bereft.
The years dragged on,
Life became a chore,
Leaving my father’s house is a necessity
Marrying Dr Fan meant new possibility ... (Note 1)

It is clear from the above that Lida has all the good reasons to break her promise not so much for her own sake as for the sake of her family. With no news from Jiang for ten years, Lida has come to believe that Jiang might have already died while sailing in the perilous open sea. Being a conscientious daughter, Lida finds it her duty to protect her paternal family reputation from any embarrassment or gossip brought about by her “extended” stay in her paternal home after coming of age. Furthermore, marriage proposals do not come her way everyday and Dr Fan presents himself as a true gentleman with a respectable profession. Taking into consideration all such factors, Lida’s subsequent marriage is not perceived as a breach of her love vow or devotion, but is regarded as morally responsible and socially acceptable in the eyes of the Chinese audience.

Unlike Ellida the dying “mermaid”, finding herself stranded on land and feeling alienated and dislocated in Wangel’s family, Lida has accepted her new gender roles as Dr Fan’s second wife and Bolai’s stepmother. That is to say, the Chinese adaptation presents Lida as one who has accepted her place and acclimatized herself

in Dr Fan's family with her romantic love buried. It is repeatedly emphasized throughout the *Yue* opera that Lida has her romantic dream brushed aside, if not forgotten, after her marriage and motherhood has strengthened her sense of belonging in the Fan family. As related by the white-clothed observer-narrator, "the birth of a child has taken Lida's mind away from her past" and "she has settled down to a new life" with Dr Fan.

It is worth noting that this unnamed white-clothed character appears throughout the whole opera, whose role is comparable to the *bongchiang* [complementary voice] in traditional Chinese theatre. Presented as a seemingly detached observer commentator, this white-clothed character serves as Lida's inner self, or at times her double, externalizing Lida's psychological turmoils, moral dilemma or troubled emotions through songs, dances, or meaning-loaded sleeve movements. She also provides the audience with a guided perspective to incidents unfolded on the stage at other times, facilitating the development of the plot and commenting on the various emotional and moral crises Lida faces in life. For instance, the white-clothed observer-narrator offers the audience a proper perspective to Lida's married life by saying "Time seemed to have mended her broken heart" and "motherhood has held her kindly in the moment."

The Mermaid in Crisis

The *Yue* operatic adaptation of *The Lady from the Sea* is quick in showing how one can be struck by calamities in life with its unexpected twists and turns. Having just overcome her romantic longing for her sailor-lover, coupled with her years of fruitless waiting, and settled down to a peaceful married life with Dr Fan, Lida finds herself emotionally disturbed once again with the loss of her son, whose death unsettles the core of her being. As she reflects on her emotional state after her son's premature death, Lida is reminded of the changing qualities of the sea once again, of her earlier loss of her beloved one, as well as of her long buried romantic dream of adventures, possibilities, happiness and freedom:

But losing my son has opened a gaping hole inside...
Here away from the island
I put the sea out of my mind
But in my child's last hours
I saw the blue sea in his eyes.

In the *Yue* operatic adaptation of *The Lady from the Sea*, Lida's tormented soul is vividly presented through the re-enactment of her parting scene with her sailor-lover Jiang in the past, accompanied by her remorse over his long absence, the recent death of her son, and her illusory re-encounter with Jiang, who accuses her of breaking her promise. In this dream scene, it is Lida's sense of propriety and morality that is emphasized as she expresses, through her hysterical dances and soliloquies, a mother's reminiscence of her deceased son and a married woman's fear of the return of her lover from the past. As the observer-narrator comments, "With the past catch up with the present, will the old flame be rekindled?" This is the moral dilemma that Lida has to resolve in life.

Fully aware of the power of her past over her present state of being, Lida resists the temptation of rekindling her romantic love with Jiang when she learns about his return from Anhong, her step-daughter's tutor. Her moral position is made clear in the *Yue* opera as she states her moral stance openly before Anhong:

Tell him not to look for me.
 Time has changed. We're not who we were before.
 [cries]
 The past returns like a ball of fire
 Fanning quiescent embers to flame.
 I am drawn to the fire, but
 Fearful of its destructive powers.

 Not a word for so many years
 Why force your way back into my heart
 A sailor always wants to roam free
 The past should stay in its place.

Such a portrayal of Lida in the *Yue* operatic adaptation places her among the conventional good and virtuous wives in the Chinese socio-moral context. Nonetheless, Jiang's unexpected return and visit to the Fan family to claim Lida force her to take an inward look at her own self, as well as her marriage.

The Mermaid's Choice between the Mountain and the Sea

As the observer-narrator rightly remarks, Lida is swept off her feet with the sailor-lover's reaffirmation of love and claim over her, thus "bringing turbulent currents to her haven", as well as putting her sense of propriety, integrity and morality at test. Her sailor-lover's tender words of unwavering love have "plucked the strings of her heart", leaving Lida lost in a moral dilemma. The persistence of Jiang forces Lida to reconsider her long forgotten romantic dream and her present peaceful and secure family life. She is invited to take a serious look at her life, which has so far been shaped by forces and circumstances beyond her control, as the observer-narrator sums up the situation on stage.

The confrontation between Lida's romantic sailor-lover Jiang and her sensible and protective husband Dr Fan brings to light the dilemma faced by Lida, who finds herself torn by opposing forces that demand her to come to terms with her inner self as well as to be at peace with love once and for all. The exchanges between Jiang and Dr Fan over their legitimate claim of Lida further show the Chinese or Confucian morality that is in full operation in the *Yue* adaptation:

JIANG: I am asking you for permission to take Lida with me.
 FAN: Lida is my wife.
 JIANG: But she was engaged to me. Lida was mine first.
 FAN: But now she is my wife.
 JIANG: A well-educated man, how can you take another man's wife?

FAN: Who is taking another man's wife? Were you married by your parents' wishes? Or on a match-maker's word?

JIANG: We made our own match and vowed to love each other forever.

FAN: Lida married me and moved here out of her own free will, and she's never mentioned being your wife.

JIANG: Dr Fan, in your profession as a doctor, it's your duty to heal and help people. Can you see what's causing Lida's heartache?

FAN: I'll ask Lida to come. We'll find out.

One notices that Jiang's changing and impulsive character is presented here as perilous as the open sea, while Dr Fan's calmness and sensible argument based on Confucian notion of propriety is emphasized to show his inner strength and stability. His readiness to give Lida the freedom of choice, is thus seen as the redeeming power of love that facilitates the process of individuation, characterized by the liberation of the self from all forms of socio-moral shackles.

It is interesting to note that in the *Yue* operatic adaptation, Lida's romantic temperament and moral dilemma are re-constructed in such a way as to suit the Chinese social, moral and cultural context as well as the traditional theatrical orientations. Portrayed as a morally responsible woman from the beginning, Lida makes every decision in her life not out of impulse or selfish consideration, but out of her sense of righteousness, integrity and moral propriety. As revealed in the *Yue* adaptation, Lida is presented as a devoted lover, who has tried her best to keep her love vow and promise, at the beginning of the *Yue* opera. Later, she is seen as a dutiful wife and a loving mother, who has settled down to her married life with Dr Fan. From a mermaid who has waited on the island for years for the return of her lover, Lida has succeeded in finding her place on land. She has adjusted well to a life of domesticity with her romantic dream of the past pushed to the back of her mind. From her sound advice given to her step-daughter Bolai, reminding the latter to make sure that it is Anhong the person that Bolai loves and not the tales of the sea that he told her, one also notices Lida's maturation, as she seems to have learned from her own "mistakes" in the past. Lida's subsequent endorsement of Bolai's marriage with Anhong elucidates her maturity as a woman who looks for goodness, stability and trustworthiness in one's marriage partner rather than romantic love.

The Mermaid Acclimatizes Herself on Chinese Soil

It must be noted that throughout the *Yue* operatic adaptation of *The Lady from the Sea*, it places its emphasis on Lida's moral sense and mature outlook on life, and her elopement with Jiang is deemed necessary, for it accentuates Lida's goodness. Her elopement is prompted not by a persistent longing for romantic love on her part but by her desperate attempt to save Jiang's life. Her sense of righteousness and propriety, together with her fear of retribution, however, has prompted her to persuade Jiang to take her home after a night of ordeals in the mountains. As Jiang relates before the Fan family after his attempted elopement with Lida, "the little lady is so full of virtues, believing in rule and decorum." Such remarks allow the audience to interpret Lida's elopement in the proper light, seeing it not as a morally transgressive behaviour, but as an evidence of her good nature and virtuous character.

The incident further prepares the audience for Lida's declaration of her moral decision at the end. As Lida confesses upon her return, she has undergone an important life journey that night in the mountains, in which she has experienced an epiphany while groping her way forward along the ancient trails in the middle of the night. Her dislocation from home allows her to see herself in a new light and to look back at her life from a distance. She comes to appreciate what Dr Fan has silently done for her. She also comes to cherish the person who has stood firmly there by her side all the while, offering her unconditional love and support:

When we lost our little boy
 You cared for me body and soul
 When my past caught up with me
 You loved me enough to set me free
 Plunging into the sea shatters the dream
 Climbing the mountain shows the way ahead
 I searched for a soul-mate to the ends of the earth
 Surprised to find mine right by my side.

Such a confession is actually a rendition of the general love relationship expressed in the two often-quoted lines from the classical Song lyric "Lantern Festival: To the Tune of Green Jade Table" [Qingyu an: yuanxi] composed by Xin Qixi (1140-1207) in which he writes,

I have been searching for my soul-mate amidst the crowd but in vain,
 when, by chance, I turn my head, and there she is, under the dim-lit light.

(Note 2)

Such an allusion to the famous classical Chinese love poem makes it clear to the audience of Lida's incessant quest for love, allowing them to associate Lida's relationship with Dr Fan with the "scholar-maiden" [caizi jiaren] love tradition in Chinese culture. As revealed in Lida's confession, she has finally awakened from her romantic dream in which romantic love is perceived as illusory and non-substantial as "the moon in the water" or "the flower in the mirror" [jinghua shuiyue], to borrow the Buddhist notion and term. This realization of her indulgence in a prolonged or extended dream represented by her sailor-lover Jiang and her subsequent awakening proves to be Lida's saving grace as a Chinese woman. She succeeds in resisting "temptation" in Buddhist terms and in returning to a proper life of morality, decorum and righteousness in Confucian terms.

Viewed in this light, Lida's decision to stay with her husband signifies not just a woman's heightened sense of her individual self, but rather, the Chinese affirmation and glorification of feminine virtues defined by moral goodness. As Lida affirms at the end, home is the place where one's heart belongs. Since she is married to Dr Fan, his home is where her heart resides. Furthermore, her moral goodness has also brought about the two men's changed attitude toward her. Such a cultural reinterpretation of Lida's decision to stay home shows the Chinese cultural reconstruction of Lida as an upholder of female virtues, Confucian morality and a

role model in traditional Chinese theatre. As the observer-narrator points out at the end of the *Yue* opera, “If a woman’s heart has gone off course, who will be able to get her back?” The answer is the woman’s own good moral sense, as well as her developed sense of propriety and integrity. Such concluding remarks clearly give the *Yue* operatic adaptation of *The Lady from the Sea* a strong didactic tone. It is evident from the analysis above that Ellida has gone through radical acculturation in order to meet the demands and expectations of the traditional *Yue* theatregoers. The cultural transformation, or re-presentation of Ellida the mermaid has been so successful, that one finds it difficult at times to recognize the Ibsenian mermaid, with her emotional crisis, spiritual quest for freedom and struggle for the liberation of the self on the traditional *Yue* stage.

Notes

1. The English translation of the *Yue* opera adaptation of *The Lady from the Sea* quoted in this article follows the English subtitles done by Sun Huizhu and Fei Chungang.
2. The English translation is mine.

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Biographical Note

Terry Siu-han Yip is Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature at Hong Kong Baptist University. She received her A.M. and Ph.D. from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, U.S.A. Her research interests range from European Romanticism and British Modernism to Chinese-Western literary relations and women/gender studies in Chinese and/or Western literature. She has published extensively on Chinese-Western comparative literature, women's writings, literature and cultural change in China, women and/or gender issues in literature, as well as the influence of European writers on modern Chinese literature. Her publications can be found in academic books and journals published in Australia, Bratislava, Canada, China, Holland, Hong Kong, Japan, Norway, Taiwan, and the United States. Her recent publications appear in *Gender, Discourse and the Self in Literature: Issues in Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong*. Hong Kong (Chinese University Press, 2010), *Ibsen and the Modern Self* (Center for Ibsen Studies of University of Oslo and Open University of Hong Kong Press, 2010), and *Narrating Race: Asia, (Trans)Nationalism, Social Change* (Rodopi, 2012).

Summary

Ibsen has created Ellida Wangel in *The Lady from the Sea* as a "mermaid" stranded on land, feeling trapped in her marriage with Dr Wangel and suffocated by her restrictive gender roles as wife and step-mother. The play focuses on Ellida the dying mermaid's process of individuation as she struggles to seek happiness, freedom and self-fulfilment in life. Through Ellida's entangled relationship with the Stranger and her husband, Ibsen has created a living "mermaid", who enables him to explore gender relations, individual freedom and choice, as well as the liberation of the self.

However, when *The Lady from the Sea* was transposed from Norway to China and adapted for the traditional Chinese theatre, the Chinese *Yue* theatre in this case, Ellida had undergone drastic changes in order to suit the traditional *Yue* theatregoers' expectations and taste, as well as to fit the socio-cultural norm of traditional *Yue* opera.

Instead of examining those technical alterations such as rearrangement of scenes (Ye, 2011, 20), the use of symbols (Wu, 2011, 80), the setting (Wu, 2011, 78), or theatrical performance and devices (Qing Yun, 2010, 32) adopted in the Chinese operatic adaptation of *The Lady from the Sea*, this article focuses on the cultural re-presentation of Ellida and the re-constitution of her character, the purpose of which is to make her plausible as a Chinese woman on the traditional *Yue* stage. A close study of the cultural transformation of Ellida and her re-orientation on the traditional *Yue* stage adaptation will enable the reader to better understand the Chinese cultural emphasis on didacticism, Confucian morality and propriety in

traditional drama and theatre, as well as the difficulties involved in transporting Ibsen's mermaid to the Chinese traditional Yue stage.

Keywords

Ibsen, cultural transformation, operatic adaptation, Chinese Yue opera, Confucian morality, gender, self.