

Presentation and Representation of Time and Space in Chinese Traditional Theatre: with Special Reference to *The Peony Pavilion**

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Players perform onstage, but the characters they play may be in a living room, a courtyard, a garden, or even in a supernatural world. If the audience sees the stage as nothing more than a platform for performance, they will see players as players rather than characters they pretend to be on the stage. The scene in which characters act in a play cannot be transformed into the setting for the play plot until a scenic stage is constructed to display and specify the time and place. If the scene is a room, the objects employed to indicate it should be a door, windows, and walls; if the scene is a garden, there should be flowers, herbs and hedges; if the scene is a graveyard, there should be tombs and tomb tablets.

The attempt to create an illusion of reality or verisimilitude started first with the Renaissance in Italy in the 15th century. This naturalistic approach dominated the following three centuries of European stage designing and makes its influence felt until today (Banham 1995: 1090-96; Oenslager 1975: 23-5). Since then, plastic arts have been widely employed in the Western-style theatre to display or specify the time and place of a dramatic plot, and with the help of painted and shaped three-dimensional set pieces, the stage designer creates a true-to-life theatrical world on the stage with houses, churches, streets, walls, pillars, doors, trees, and flowers (Nagler 1952: 71-81; Simonson 1950: 1-6). In Chinese traditional theatre, however, there is no stage scenery designed with a view to creating an illusionary effect of reality in the Western sense. Instead, Chinese traditional theatre aims to 'create a theatrical world of its own and gives merely certain necessary hints as to the place and time of the action, which the imagination of the spectator is free to expand as he lists' (Chen 1949: 27).

In Chinese traditional theatre, when the heroine in the play lifts her silk skirt, and sets foot cautiously on nonexistent steppingstones, a vivid scene will arise in the imagination of the audience of her treading stones across a stream. But when she opens an imaginary door, and steps over a nonexistent threshold, she will evoke a different picture in the mind of the audience, who will imagine that the stage has been transformed into a bedroom. In the Western theatrical tradition as represented by Italian Renaissance and French neo-classical theatre, the stage set for such a scene would be a room with three sides made up of painted and shaped objects, while the supposedly existent fourth side would be left open for the audience to watch what is going on inside. The stage in Chinese traditional theatre is usually empty of set designs, and Chinese artists rely heavily on their stylised action of opening a door and stepping over a threshold to give the audience an impression of the stage as a room.

The primary purpose for play performance on the Chinese traditional stage is not to imitate reality but to impress the audience, which is also the case with *commedia dell'arte*, opera, ballet or musical shows in the Western tradition.

The Western theatrical tradition attaches great importance to creating a visual reality on the stage, and is therefore more representational than presentational (Banham 1995: 1086). By employing visual devices such as 'false perspective or exaggerated light and shade,' a stage

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designer for the Western style theatre can make things look ‘deeper, taller, farther off or more massive than the stage would allow in reality’ (Holt 1988: 36). A space of 5 metres high, 10 metres long and 15 metres wide on the stage may be able to represent a much larger and deeper space perceived from a rectilinear, long-range perspective. Through sculptural and painterly settings, the Western style theatre is able to create a total illusion of streams flowing through mountain valleys, sheep grazing on green hillsides, birds flying and singing in the trees, and stars twinkling high in the dark blue sky.

‘As opposed to the Western-style and various other modern dramas of the twentieth century’, as William Dolby notes (1976: 184), ‘Chinese traditional drama has in general placed more emphasis on music, words, and actors than on scenery, lighting and stage properties’. Usually devoid of specific scenery and set pieces, Chinese traditional theatre emphasizes theatricality and acknowledges the theatre as theatre. The Chinese stage is perceived by both actors and spectators as ‘a platform upon which to display the performers’ four skills: song (*chang*), speech (*nian*), dance-acting (*zuo*), which includes pure dance, pantomime, and all the visible, physical results of ‘acting’ in the Western sense; and combat (*da*), which encompasses not only actual fighting with fists, knives, swords, and spears, but also acrobatics as well’

(Wichmann-Walczak 2004: 130; see also Wu Xinlei 吳新雷 & Zhu Donglin 朱棟霖 2004: 314-27 for detailed descriptions of these four performing skills on the Chinese stage).

In Chinese traditional theatre, the posture and movement of players, particularly their highly symbolic and stylised actions, allow them to express an unlimited space in the limited space on the stage. It is here that Chinese traditional theatre finds allies in the Western performing arts such as ballet, mime and pantomime. If there is a distance of twenty feet between stage right and stage left, this stage space in Chinese traditional theatre will be big enough for an actor to play climbing a high mountain, and walking through a deep valley, which may cover a distance in reality many times the real distance between the two sides of the stage.

This highly imaginary spatial representation is enhanced further by the possibility of almost unlimitedly compressing and expanding time on the Chinese stage. Time on the Chinese stage is categorised respectively as stage time [*wutai shijian* 舞台時間]; as dramatic plot action time [*qingjie xingdong shijian* 情節行動時間]; as perceptible time [*ganjue shijian* 感覺時間], which refers to the flow of time onstage perceived by the audience (Li Xiao 李曉 1989: 48-59). In terms of plot action time, a Chinese traditional drama may cover a very short period of time, say, less than twenty-four hours as in *Farewell My Concubine* [*Bawang bie ji* 霸王別姬], but more often than not it spans months or even years, as in Tang Xianzu’s 湯顯祖 (1550-1616) *The Peony Pavilion*, the most influential Ming 明 (1368-1644) *chuanqi* 傳奇 [transmission of the marvellous] drama about a young lady’s dying of lovesickness, then rising from the dead, and eventually fulfilling her dream of marrying her lover.

In the Western theatrical tradition, the dramatic plot time tends to exceed the stage time. Within two or three hours, we are presented onstage with a life lived by the hero or heroine which may have a duration of twenty-four or more hours. Only during the intervals or between the rise and fall of the curtain does the dramatic plot time pass by rapidly, often without being noticed. The audience perceive the passage of the time through players’ lines and the dramatic plot action unfolded onstage. As regards the scene or act itself, the real-life time corresponds almost exactly with the dramatic plot time. If the *dramatis personae* perform for twenty minutes onstage, the audience will think of them spending as much time in real life as on the stage.

Stage time in a traditional Chinese play is often ‘compressed in the exposition of plot’ and ‘expanded in the expression of emotional states’ (Wichmann-Walczak 2004: 149). When a Chinese actor plays travelling miles on his way to visit a friend, he may describe his journey by a few lines of speech accompanied by several circles of the stage, and the audience will instantly understand through his recitations and/or highly symbolic and stylised actions that he has spent quite a few hours covering the distance much in the same way as a storyteller skims over a period of time in narrating an event as follows:

The girl put on her clothes, went out and disappeared before Scholar Liu had time to rush out to say good-bye. The next night she came again but didn’t tell who she was, although Scholar Liu asked several times about her name. The same thing repeated itself in the following ten odd days.

It will not take the reader more than ten seconds to finish reading this passage, but the event narrated in it covers a span of more than ten days in terms of imaginary or story time. This story continues:

One night when the girl came to join him in bed, Scholar Liu said, ‘If you don’t tell me your real name, I’m afraid that I can’t continue our relationship because my parents will blame me if our affair is revealed to them. You’d better tell me the truth so that I can ask my parents to arrange a marriage for us through a match-maker. Wouldn’t it better if we could live as husband and wife all our life?’ Hearing this, the girl smiled, but remained silent until Scholar Liu urged her time and again. With tears in her eyes, she said, ‘Please don’t be scared. I was the former prefect, Du’s daughter. I am 18 years old but have not married yet. I died of lovesickness, and I am now living in the rear garden under a plum tree. I loved this tree so much that I left my last word for my mother to bury me under the tree after my death. Now a year has passed, but my soul hasn’t left my body yet.’¹

Different from the previous quotation, this passage is basically made up of dialogue. The time you’ve spent reading this part of the story roughly corresponds with the story time, namely the time the scholar and the ghost girl spend on the dialogue between them. Here we find ‘the meeting point of story time and discourse/text time, where scenes of dialogue are enacted in real time’ (Keen 2003: 92).

In narrative literature, story time sometimes equals text time, and sometimes, several years of time flashes by within a blink of eyes. It is also the case with Chinese traditional drama, which requires the player to abide by the law of time in narration and at the same time expects the audience to come within a couple of seconds to terms with the story time which may cover a span of hours, months or even years in real life, as shown below:

You see before you the spirit form of Bridal Du. My death came of a dream, besotted with passion and longing for love. It happened that the tenth judge of Hell was relieved of his post, and for three years I lodged in the women’s cells with none to despatch my case.

¹ These two passages are taken from ‘Bridal Du Longing for Love Returns in Spirit Form’ [*Du Bridal mu se huan hun* 杜麗娘慕色還魂], a Ming vernacular short story [*ni huaben* 擬話本] story, which provides the primary prototype for *The Peony Pavilion*. The translation is mine. For this story, see Tang Xianzu (2002: 313-9).

Then it was my good fortune to meet with a judge who took pity on me and granted my temporary release. This is a night of bright moon and gentle breeze and I roam at will. But here is the old garden to the rear of the study – how can it have been turned into an Apricot Blossom Shrine? How deeply this distresses me!

The above-quoted passage is taken from Scene 27, ‘Spirit Roaming’ [*Hunyou* 魂遊] of *The Peony Pavilion*. In this full-length *chuanqi* drama of fifty-five scenes, the most celebrated and most frequently performed is Scene 10, ‘The Interrupted Dream’ [*Jingmeng* 驚夢], in which Bridal Du, the heroine of this drama, takes a springtime stroll with her maidservant Fragrance in a large, yet mysteriously empty, garden. The performance of this scene as a *Kun* opera [*kunju* 昆劇] starts with Bridal standing alone in a ‘tiny leaf-locked court’, lamenting over the passing of springtime.² She sings a brief yet beautiful heart-touching aria before withdrawing into her bedchamber, asking Fragrance her maidservant to prepare for her to take a secret stroll in the rear garden. The next moment sees Bridal, accompanied by her maidservant, stealing out into the garden through a long ‘gold-dust lacquered corridor’. Her heart of spring is stirred at first sight of a garden clothed in bloom, as she sighs: ‘Without visiting this garden, how could I ever have realised the splendour of spring!’

Wide with joy at the beautiful view of the spring scene, Bridal and Fragrance cannot help dancing and singing all the way through the garden. They first come to a pond with a mossy edge, and ‘a gilded pleasure boat in waves of mist on the water’, the vision of which is evoked onstage by a graceful paddling gesture of the heroine. They continue their talk and walk through winding flower paths before finding themselves in front of a flight of steps leading up to ‘the rosy clouds frame emerald Peony Pavilion’. Standing at the top of the pavilion and looking around, they enjoy to their heart’s content a magnificent scene of flowers of various colours blooming brightly all over the garden, orioles and swallows flying in pairs and chirping pleasantly at the top of trees, and green hills lying beyond a mound of weathered rocks and stretching as far as the eye can see.

In this garden-strolling sequence, the shift of scenes is revealed through Bridal’s monologue and her dialogue with Fragrance, and their dancing-acting movement across the stage performed to arias, and the changes in her emotional states echo the changes of the scenes around her, which is betrayed by the manner in which the heroine describes what she sees, as she sings:

See how deepest purple, brightest scarlet
Open their beauty only to dry well crumbling.
‘Bright the morn, lovely the scene,’
Listless and lost the heart

² *Kun* opera, also known as *kun* music [*kunqu* 昆曲], is a form of music originating from Kunshan 昆山, present Jiangsu 江蘇 province in East China, which dominated performance of *chuanqi* drama from the sixteenth century down to the nineteenth century. For a more detailed definition of *kunju*, see Nienhauser, Jr. (1986: 514-6). In describing this scene performed as a *kun* opera, I consult Bai Xianyong 白先勇 (2004a: 197-207; 2004b: 147-51), and Swatek (2002: 161-73). Quotations from this drama for performance analysis are taken from the second English edition of *The Peony Pavilion* translated by Cyril Birch (1995: 42-53).

— where is the garden ‘gay with joyous cries’?

Her feelings of regret and despair are awakened unexpectedly when she catches sight of ‘dilapidated walls and a broken-down well amidst the splendour of spring’. She cannot but feel sad and sorry for the flowers which are just in the bloom of youth but will fade away soon after spring. Feeling in no mood for a further tour around the garden, she says to her maidservant:

Bridal: We must go now.

Fragrance: Really one would never weary of enjoying this garden.

Bridal: Say no more!

In great sorrow, Bridal makes her exit. The audience watches her circling the stage couple of times before her maidservant plays opening a door for her. From this moment on, the scene shifts back from the rear garden to the inner chamber. Exhausted by the garden tour, Bridal rests against a low table drowsing into a dream, in which a young scholar Liu Mengmei 柳夢梅, which literarily means ‘Willow Dreams of Plums’, enters the garden bearing a branch of willow in his hand, and carries her beyond the railing peony-lined pavilion against the mound of weathered rocks to make love to her, thus the scene being shifted from the inner chamber to the rear garden, although the spatial translocation is understood as happening in her dream. While they are making love, which takes place offstage, twelve flower spirits appear onstage to ‘watch over her and to ensure that the ‘play of clouds and rain’ will be joyous experience for her’. Her romantic union with her lover in the dream is interrupted by the intrusion of her mother into the bedchamber, and from this moment on the scene shifts back to the inner chamber again.

The frequent shift of scenes as described above is typical of Chinese traditional drama, which makes a point of describing the changing of moods and feelings of characters through the changing of natural scenes and spaces. Most of the time the audience sees the mistress and her maidservant singing and dancing each holding a fan, and the dialogue between them occurs only when a scene, such as a tree, a flower, a pond, a boat, a pavilion or a green hill, comes into their view. At this time, they will stop to talk about it, while facing the audience, and after that, they will move away from each other and then each turn around from the opposite direction to face each other, exchanging their views about what they have seen. The spatial translocation of the mistress and her maidservant from one place to another place in the garden and from the garden to the inner chamber, and the position of a graceful plum tree, a magnificent pavilion, a painted boat on the rippling water, or a mound of weathered rocks, are revealed through their arias and recitations and suggested by their stylised gestures and dancing actions onstage. Their aria and speech go hand in hand with their body movement across the stage to conjure up a vivid picture in the imagination of the audience about the magnificence and scale of the garden and the duration of their garden tour.

It would be difficult to imagine that this highly frequent spatial translocation between the rear garden and the inner chamber, and particularly the frequent shift of scenes from one spot to another in this garden-strolling sequence could happen on a stage with a fully displayed and specified scene and space. No spectators could bear to see the rise and fall of curtains or the change of scenes every two or three minutes. An alternative way might be to constantly change the view set in the background or to swiftly move in and move out a turnable platform, as is often the case with some avant-garde performance in the experimental theatre. This may work for a while, but cannot be kept up throughout the performance, as constantly changing scenes and backgrounds would inevitably turn the stage performance of players into a fancy show of set-designing techniques. In addition, the continuity and consistence of the

splendid dialogue and aria and the well-measured rhythm of graceful body movement accompanied to the music would be spoiled.

Apart from the above-described features derived from narrative literature in terms of time and space, Chinese traditional drama, as shown in the performance of Scene 10 of *The Peony Pavilion*, also depends on players' stylised and symbolic actions to achieve an organic union of time and space by presenting simultaneously two different story spaces on the stage. At first glance, it seems to be impossible, but actually, this way of stage presentation has been deeply rooted in the Chinese theatrical tradition.

As has been mentioned before, the Chinese traditional stage is very bare. 'A table and two chairs,' as Chen (1949: 28) observes, 'are about the only two 'constructions' which a Chinese traditional theatre needs for its stage.' A setting for a dramatic plot or a spatial and/or temporal change is usually revealed and realised onstage through the arrangement of these three pieces of furniture (Wu Xinlei & Zhu Donglin 2004: 375). For example, a chair placed in front of the table may indicate a hall, a lounge or an antechamber, and a chair with embroidered cushions placed behind the table may stand for a study, a bed, or a bedroom. A table can serve as a boat, a hill, a gate tower, a royal palace or a magistrate court. A whip about three feet long indicates a horse, and an actor entering with a whip in his right hand will be immediately understood to be riding. Carrying a lantern or a candle indicates that it is evening or dark, and pulling on an oar indicates rowing a boat (Chen 1949: 28-9; see also Gu Qun 顧群 et. al. 1998: 36-43).

With the help of these highly conventional signs, the scene changes smoothly onstage whenever the occasion demands, but the stage remains unchanged. Following the relatively fixed patterns of actors' movement on the stage the audience enters into a different time and space unfolded in the dramatic plot.

The Chinese traditional stage is an open space for the audience and the actors as well. After an actor comes onstage, he does not have to confine his/her action to a fixed or closed space. He may be in a garden or in a courtyard, and when the time comes for him to enter a room, what he needs to do is just play opening an imaginary door and stepping over an imaginary threshold. Only at this moment will the character who is already in the room be able to notice him and to talk to him. The moment when the actor steps over the threshold, the whole stage is transformed into a room. These two players can move about on the stage totally free of any such objects or obstacles as a door or a wall which existed a minute ago in the imagination of the actor and the spectator. If these two players both turn around and step out over the imaginary threshold, the spectator will know that they have walked out of the room. And at this moment, the whole scene is turned back into an outdoor space, which may be a courtyard or a garden, although the table and the two chairs are still left on the stage.

The stage setting can be changed from an outdoor space into an indoor space instantly, and can also be divided into two spaces: a space within a room and a space outside the room, so that a player can play eavesdropping on what is happening on the other side of an imaginary wall of the room with its imaginary door being closed, as is shown in Scene 30 of *The Peony Pavilion*, 'Disrupted Joy' [*Huan nao* 歡撓], in which a Taoist nun, after overhearing a female voice coming from the hero's bedroom at night, knocks the door open for a thorough search in the room for a suspected novice.

There may be a third situation, in which one may imagine that one of the two players in the room steps over the threshold and walks out of the room, leaving the other behind in the room. From that moment on, the whole stage becomes an indoor space to the player left in the room, but an outdoor space to the player who has walked out of the room. However, the separation of stage into two different spaces does not prevent them from moving about freely.

While they are acting, they pretend to be alone without anybody being present on the stage. In the eyes of the audience, however, one player remains staying within the wall and the other player standing outside the wall, and the only possible difference between them in their spatial relationship to each other on the stage is that the player within the wall is possibly closer to the audience and the player outside the wall farther away from them.

These two characters in the play may walk by each other, or stand close to each other. They are singing and speaking loudly on the stage, but are not supposed to look at each other, because in the imagination of the audience they are set in two totally different spaces. They cannot meet and talk until either the player within the imaginary wall steps out of the room over the imaginary threshold or the player outside the imaginary wall comes walking in the opposite direction into the room through the imaginary door.

Sometimes, there is even no need to imagine there is a wall, a door or a threshold to mark out different spaces on the stage. Suppose that a character in a play is waiting for another character, and the setting for this waiting sequence in the play is not outdoors but indoors, say, in the bedroom, as is the case with the above mentioned Scene 30 of *The Peony Pavilion*, in which the hero Mengmei is waiting in his bedroom for a romantic union with the ghost of Bridal. The audience will see on the stage two characters at once: one who is waiting and the other who is being waited for, but neither of them is supposed to see the other because the character who is being waited for is supposed to have covered a long distance before they can meet in the garden. In the case of Scene 30 of *The Peony Pavilion*, the ghost girl is understood as returning from the world of the dead to the world of the living to meet her lover. The distance in space between them can be expressed through monologue, dialogue, and aria in combination with stylised actions and gestures such as getting on and down a horse, climbing a mountain, crossing a bridge, paddling a boat, walking through a forest, or simply circling around the stage.

The simultaneous presentation on the stage of different happenings in different spaces will thus produce a most powerful dramatic tension. This kind of visual impact upon the audience is hardly felt in other forms of arts except paintings, especially in the story-telling wall paintings. Standing in front of them, one may see at once different happenings in different places, such as men running after a wild boar in the forest, women cooking in the caves, and children splashing water in the river. Occasionally, film directors create a similar visual effect through the splitting of screens and parallel-editing of scenes. Such is also the case with some avant-garde, experimental theatres, in which the audience will not be surprised to see on the stage different actions happening at the same time but in supposedly different spaces.

The occasional attempt to violate the Aristotelian principle of three unities of time, place and action as seen in some forms of modern performing arts is made mainly to counter or complement the centuries-long Western theatrical tradition and should therefore not be understood as having developed into a norm or a convention, as they do not rely upon this way of scenic presentation to display and develop the dramatic plot. In contrast, Chinese traditional theatre is primarily built on the possibility of changing the scene and setting for a play story at any time when necessary and presenting onstage simultaneously different happenings in different spaces. By organising numerous artistic elements and theatrical devices – costume, dance, masks, make-ups, acting, singing, speaking, story telling and stage designing – into a united whole, Chinese traditional theatre demonstrates itself as typical of ‘total theatre’ with a harmonious presentation and representation of time, place and action on the stage, as shown in *The Peony Pavilion*.

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