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Nationality and Universality: The Rewrite of Madam White Snake under Globalization in Tian Qinxin's spoken Drama Green Snake

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ABSTRACT

The acceleration of globalization has expanded the experience of drama performance and spectatorship from a national terrain to an international sphere. With translation or adaptation, drama is endowed with the probability to transcend the boundary of one nation to reach audiences of various countries. In this condition, the share-ability of drama among cosmopolitan audience emerge as an essential issue especially in view of audience's cultural discrepancies. Apart from language, this dissertation argues that the tension between nationality and universality in drama also plays a crucial part in whether one drama could be appreciated worldwide and could be further incorporated as part of world drama. Instead of addressing this issue from theoretical construction, this article attempts to shed light on it through a case study, grounding itself in Tian Qinxin's spoken drama Green Snake. This drama, despite its engagement with distinct Chinese culture, moves beyond its national border to be admired by audience of America and Britain. Deriving its uniqueness and enchantment from a traditional Chinese folk saga that involves three worlds - human, Buddha and demon, this play in the meantime demonstrates its universality not only by the examination of individuals' emotional predicament in modern society, but also by the deployment of modern stage arts.

Keywords: Globalization, Adaptation, Nationality, Universality, Tian Qinxin.

JEL Classification Code: Z10, Z11, Z12, Z13, Z19

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1. Introduction

As a prominent playwright and director in adapting Chinese classical literature into spoken drama, Tian Qinxin acquires her reputation as an inheritor who explores and promotes Chinese traditional aesthetic and ethos, as well as a developer who examines human predicament in

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contemporary world through rewriting well-known stories². Adapted from Chinese traditional folklore *Madam White Snake* and Li Bihua's 1986 novel of the same name, and co-produced by National Theatre of China and National Theatre of Scotland, *Green Snake* (2003), not only strikes an emotional chord with contemporary audience in China, but also impresses and touches audience in Edinburgh Festival Fringe and the Kennedy Center American Theater Festival. Research interests in this drama mainly concentrate on women's gender and sexuality, the aesthetics of Zen Buddhism, or its dramaturgy³. Few scholars examine this play under the terrain of globalization and world drama, exploring how this play despite its engagement with distinct Chinese culture, moves beyond its national border to be admired by the audience of America and Britain. Taking *Green Snake* as a case study, this article attempts to shed light on how nationality and universality could be dealt with in spoken drama so that cosmopolitan audience could have the opportunity to better appreciate or benefit from the cultural and artistic treasure of multifarious nations.

2. National elements and universal concern

With the postulation of concept—*Weltliteratur*⁴ by Goethe, the tension of nationality and universality in literary works has evoked scholars attention in defining and evaluating what is world literature⁵. It is undeniable that “a work of literature has an exceptional ability to transcend the boundaries of culture that produces it” (Damrosch, 2008, p2), but that ability primarily originates from the essential and peculiar attributes of the cultural context, from which literary work gains its attractiveness, uniqueness, and innovativeness. As Lazarus indicates, “there is no necessary contradiction between the ideas of the ‘universal’ and the ‘local’ or the ‘national’, but that, on the contrary, there are only local universalisms (and, for that matter, only ‘local cosmopolitanisms’” (Lazarus, 2011, p191). Whereas, as Tian argues that to enhance the share-ability of a particular culture, the essential elements of that culture should be decoded and represented in a modern way which echoes individuals' living dilemma in contemporary society (Gu, 2013, p1).

Tian's *Green Snake* derives from a Chinese traditional folklore in Song Dynasty, an inter-species love story between human being and snake goblin. Rewritten by Hong Kong novelist Li Bihua into a story of lust and seduction in 1989, this folklore in 2003 is further adapted by Tian into a spoken drama in which love, desire and sexuality in the worlds of three planes—human, Buddha and goblin are inquired as central topic. Tian's this adaptation from both the folklore and the novel endows this drama a dense cultural connotation in the sense that Tian's process of representation is actually an intertextual conversation among disparate cultures manifested in these three works. Through reshaping minor characters such as *Green Snake* and *Fa Hai*, Tian's drama not only reflects upon the traditional cultural context concerning women's gender role and the Buddhism, but also examines the contemporary predicament in view of various desires in contemporary society.

In this drama, *Green Snake* (Xiao Qing), a peripheral character who is always obedient to her elder sister *White Snake* (Bai Suzhen) and brother-in-law *Xu Xian* in the folktale, is reshaped into a modern feminist with emancipated sexuality and untraditional gender role. After inhaling some human lust discarded by monks practicing to be Buddha, *Xiao Qing* and *Suzhen*—longing to become human beings—successfully acquire certain attributes exclusive to human, that is, the capability to desire for sex and love. Disparate from *Suzhen* who craves to be housewife and eventually marries *Xu Xian*, *Xiao*

² Until now, Tian has already adapted quite a few Chinese classical literature into modern dramas, for instance, *The Field of Life and Death* (1999), *The Orphan of Zhao* (2003), *Peach Blossom* (2006), *Red Rose and White Rose* (2007), *Four Generations* (2010), *Green Snake* (2013), *Beijing Fayuan Temple* (2015), *Listening to Master Hong Yi* (2017), etc. Apart from Chinese literature, Tian also engaged with adapting Shakespeare's *King Lear* into *Things in Ming Dynasty* (2008), a play-within-a-play and Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* into a modern Chinese drama of love and feud in the age of bicycle. Dedicated to flourishing spoken drama in China, Tian is endowed with numerous awards of high prestige, such as Cao Yu Theatre Literature Award, Golden Award of Performance in Chinese Arts Festival, National Stage Art Award, etc.

³ For detailed information, see Chen's *Female Sentiments in Tian Qinxin's Green Snake* (2016); Fang & Huang's *Tian Qinxin's Zen Drama* (2018); Gu's *Tian Qinxin's Dramaturgy* (2013).

⁴ According to Wang Ning, Goethe's postulation of this concept was “largely inspired by non-Western literary works, including some marginal Chinese literary works of minor importance”. Despite its apparent “utopian characteristic”, this concept has evolved over 180 years to be “a cutting-theoretical topic” in the term of “world literature”. Wang argues that this issue is “closely related to the phenomenon of globalization and is actually a consequence of the global capitalization in culture and literature.” (Wang, 2011, p295-296)

⁵ For more information, see Lazarus's *Cosmopolitanism and the specificity of the local in world literature* (2011), Terian's *National Literature, World Literatures, and Universality in Romanian Cultural Criticism 1867-1947* (2013), von Baeyer's *The Displaced Cosmopolitan: Canadian Nationality and World Citizenship in the Fiction of Mavis Gallant* (2015), Wang & Ma's *Localization, Globalization, and Traveling Chinese Culture* (2015).

Qing seeks to release her lust by having sex with various strangers, with no intention to confine her sexuality within marriage. This emancipation of Xiao Qing's sexuality and her obsession with a monk in this drama write back to the patriarchal mode of love and marriage in Song Dynasty. However, this sexual satisfaction doesn't bring her happiness any more when Xiao Qing realizes that there is such a thing called love in human world, which according to Suzhen is to find someone who would like to spend his whole life only with you. Inspired by the experience of Sun Zhen whose lover is the first man she encounters, Xiao Qing firmly believes that the first man she met in human world is her true love and that sleeping with him guarantees the eternity of it. Sticking to this belief, Xiao Qing passionately heads to Jin Shan Temple, expecting to sleep with the first man she met, Fa Hai, a monk who ironically is not supposed to be excited because of his heart disease, who dedicates his whole life to getting rid of all human desires so as to become a Buddha.

As for Fa Hai, rather than remaining as a ruthless and emotionless monk in previous versions, he is portrayed in this play as a human being who struggles to removing his personal desire so as to become a Buddha⁶ and yet at the same time shows his compassion to all the creatures⁷. Primarily, Fa Hai pretends to have no affection towards this lovely Green Snake, the first woman boldly enough to treat him as a man: Fa Hai, "Didn't you notice my kasaya?"; Xiao Qing, "What kasaya? I only see a man." But he actually indicates his affection and compassion on Xiao Qing by instructing her that sex is not the only aspect of substantial importance for being human and by his acquiescence of Xiao Qing's staying in Jinshan Temple. After Su Zhen being confined in Lei Feng Tower, Xiao Qing having nowhere to go inhabits on the roof beam of Fa Hai's practice room in Jin Shan Temple for about five hundred years. Upon the parinirvana of Fa Hai, Xiao Qing shows up, asking him,

"Have you ever been in love with me, even just a little bit?"

"What do you think? You have circled in my beam for five hundred years."

"So you knew! I just want you to be on my side."

...

"With your coiling in my beam for five hundred years, I keep mediating on our relations. Now I realize that you are the same with me. We have no differences."

"You understand my love for you, eventually."

"You love narrowly."

At the end of his life, Fa Hai has an epiphany that as a monk he could and should love Xiao Qing just as Buddha loves all the creature in the world. In this way, the described antagonism between monk and goblin in the folklore and Li's novel is reconstructed by Tian through highlighting goblin's intense aspiration for and bold pursuit of love, and Buddhism's kindness towards all creatures. For the next live circle, despite the opportunity to be a Buddha who is privileged not to suffer from disease, senility, and death as human being do, Fa Hai chooses to be an ordinary man, hoping to encounter Xiao Qing who would become a human girl in her following samsara as she wishes.

In this spoken drama where goblin seeks to be human, human to be Buddha, Tian narrates a microcosm of modern world in which individuals are trapped and suffered by multifarious desires. In some occasions, how certain desire is aroused remains unknown to individuals especially in contemporary society of information explosion where individuals' desire to watch, to know is commercialized. Compared with explicit causes of two snakes' craving for being human in the folklore and Li's novel⁸, Xiao Qing and Su Zhen in Tian's drama "not knowing what stuff has been eaten, want to be human". Because of that desire, Xiao Qing and Su Zhen attempt to behave like women, experiencing love and sex with men. Even for Fa Hai whose lifelong practice as a monk is to remain undisturbed from various emotions, he is unable to discard desire on account that his pursuit to be Buddha is one type of desire. In this sense, individuals' struggling amidst the vast ocean of desires in contemporary world is delineated in Tian's spoken drama. To shed light on this predicament of human beings, Tian incorporates the aesthetics of China's Zen Buddhism whose main philosophy is that life is a practice

⁶ The privilege of being a Buddha lies in the capability to remain tranquility, immune from disruption of various emotions and desires.

⁷ According to Buddhism, all the creatures are the same in nature because they are probably to become any other species during their samsara from past to present and then to the future.

⁸ In the *Madam White Snake*, so as to express her gratitude to Xu Xian who once saves her life, Su Zhen determines to marry Xu Xian, deploying her mana to assist Xu Xian to be a prestigious doctor. In Li's novel, Xiao Qing and Su Zhen are set up by an Immortal to eat Dan medicine which makes them eager for human love and sex.

concerning desire and only when people learn to let go of their obsessiveness can he or she achieves renaissance⁹. In Tian's play, two couples re-encounter each other in the era of Republic of China during which all their former entanglements are forgotten and a renewed life embarks on. In a word, through this adaptation, Tian attempts to stage a national drama which addresses universal concern and culture-based suggestions.

3. Traditional and modern stage art

In order to better present the nationality and universality of *Green Snake*, Tian modernizes traditional Chinese stage arts and deploys numerous western modern drama aesthetics. Given narrative time, a bunch of techniques such as characters' self-introduction in Beijing opera and Bertolt Brecht's theory of de-familiarization are adopted; to present body language, the stylized conventions in Peking Opera Tian and Antonia Artaud's theory of body language are deployed. This blending of national and modern aesthetics of drama performance comprise the idiosyncrasies of Tian's theatre.

The deconstruction of lineal narrative time through characters' monologue gives rise to one main feature of this play. In Beijing Opera, that time changes along with the speaking of character who functions both as narrator and character is one crucial dramaturgy concerning time. Two non-sequential eras could be mingled together by characters' voice-over; the flow of time could remain still so as to foreground characters' internal movements. For instance, in Tian's drama, the comparison between Song Dynasty and contemporary period are accomplished by the narrating of character, pedestrian B, "the night towns of Song Dynasty and the contemporary period have no difference, both serving as place for men and women to seek entertainment"; the suspense of time during Su Zhen's monologue is deployed to externalize and highlight her internal desire of being a housewife, "I'd like to be that woman sitting in the bed of a warm house with husband and children besides... .. How I hope I can stroll in this narrow lane, forever accompanied by my lover." This unnatural representation of time endows audience a sense of strangeness which enable them to jump out of the play and examine it as an observer. "By making audience uncomfortable through breaking of certain theoretical norms, the audience are immediately forced to think about the particular scene or message at that point in time" (Lim, 2014, p89).

In this play, body language is another element of substantial importance for the portrayal of characters. Trained as a Beijing Opera performer and influenced by Artaud's theory of body enchantment, Tian pays particular attention to the aesthetic feelings and performative function of body language in modern drama. In this play, both performers—Su Zhen and Xiao Qing—have the experience of learning Beijing Opera for almost ten years. Owing to this, their performance is intersected with certain stylized actions in Beijing Opera. Having absorbed sexual desires dropped by monks, Xiao Qing is unable to control her lust. To manifest this status, Xiao Qing twirls her legs on Fa Hai's waist, gazing Fa Hai and remaining unmoved for about ten seconds. This pause in Beijing Opera is identified as show-up (Liang Xiang), a statue-like posture after a dance, a highlight of characters' spirit status. Moreover, the transformation of Su Zhen and Xiao Qing from snake to human being is visualized by body movements and sounds. The attributes of snake, such as sticking out tongue, crawling forwards and the hissing are embodied by actors to demonstrate their identity as snake goblins; the sudden falling down of Xiao Qing presents the maladjustment of walking upright as human beings. These visual and auditory elements are staged to invoke audience's perception on the features of snake and human beings. As Jamieson and Artaud argues that the hyperbolic body languages performed by actors on stage could awaken audience' gradually-sullen capability of perception. (Jamieson & Artaud, p31)

4. Conclusion

Blending nationality and universality in both contents and stage arts, Tian's spoken drama *Green Snake* "was commented to be the 'a mysterious play that most deserves to await' by the *The Scotsman* and was recommended by the prominent journal of England *The Stage* in its coverage and two columns." (People Net, 2014). Washington Post praised it as "lovely and impressive": "The drama, part of the center's ongoing world stages festival of international theater, fondly embraces folklore and

⁹ For more information, see Master Sheng's *Intellects of Zen* (2005).

formality in telling the centuries-old fable of two sister snakes experiencing love and lust as they yearn to become human.” (Washington Post, 2014) This play to certain extent is a success which catches foreign audiences’ attention and strikes a chord with their emotions.

Based on the examination of Tian’s *Green Snake*, this article contends that to expand the boundaries of drama communication and transmission, national culture should be the soil where the attractiveness and peculiarity of drama take root. Embedded in such a story with local or national idiosyncrasies, the predicaments that this drama addresses should be certain universal concerns that could arouse cosmopolitan audience’s resonance. As for playwrights’ contemplation on these predicaments, wisdom contained in their cultural or philosophical heritage might be drawn upon. Moreover, to enhance the share-ability of such treasure in different cultures, modern stage arts can be adopted in combination with the traditional ones.

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