

National Theatre of China's *Romeo and Juliet* and Its Rituals

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the “Chinese-ness” of this brand new production of *Romeo and Juliet* by the National Theatre of China, from a ritual perspective. Three main areas were discussed. Firstly, this play has got several religious connotations. The absence of religion in this play's setting is relevant to China's current high percentage of atheists. Despite that, several religions, such as Buddhism, Daoism and Christianity, are mentioned in this play. Secondly, the play has also incorporated several Chinese culture and traditions. The use of bicycles as one of the main props can be linked to the cultural significance of bicycles in China. The play also incorporated other cultural and traditional elements such as wedding customaries in China, Xinjiang dance, as well as the Chinese tongue twisters. Finally, the play has incorporated multiple Brechtian moments. Perhaps the Brechtian moments can lead audience to think about the current religious and cultural developments in modern China.

Introduction

According to Oxford Dictionary, a ritual is “a religious or solemn ceremony consisting of a series of actions performed according to a prescribed order, or an action arising from a convention or tradition”. Erik Erikson described a ritual as “a special form of everyday behaviour” (Erikson, 1996), while Bobby Alexander highlighted that ritual is “a planned or improvised performance that effects a transition from everyday life to an alternative framework within which the everyday is transformed” (Alexander, 1991). In his paper, *Risk, Ritual and Performance*, Leo Howe established the relationships between performance and ritual. A performance is characterized by its process, presence, uniqueness, strategy, and even risk. A ritual goes through very much a similar process and, likewise a performance, consists of risks, both intrinsically and extrinsically (Howe, 2000).

The National Theatre of China² has created a brand new piece of *Romeo and Juliet*, adapted from William Shakespeare's original play for the 42nd Hong Kong Arts Festival in 2014³, and also in conjunction with the 450th anniversary of the Bard⁴. The play is adapted and directed by Chinese director, TianQinxin and was opened to the public for the first time on 1st March 2014 in the Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts, alongside plans to tour different cities in China after the Hong Kong run. Though the love and struggles of the characters Romeo and Juliet remain fairly similar to the original, this adaptation is quite different in terms of the setting. This version is definitely more modernized and the approach and characters are definitely more Chinese.

For instance, in the original story, it was Romeo, who first met Juliet in the party. In this play, the two lovers met in a scene where Juliet was trying to replace the light bulb of a faulty lamp. In the original story, Romeo professed his love to Juliet via the Juliet's balcony, however, in this version, both Romeo and Juliet conducted their meetings on the top of the two lamp posts. Both characters were open in expressing their love for each other. The two opposing families are not the Montagues and Capulets, rather they are the Luo(罗) clan and the Zhu(朱)clan⁵. I would say that this play is definitely not merely a version of the

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² The National Theatre of China is an affiliated organization of the Ministry of Culture in China. It is a company dedicated to produce and stage outstanding theatrical works from both Chinese and Western traditions.

³ The Hong Kong Arts Festival is an annual event that seeks to showcase premier art works in the international city of Hong Kong. The year 2014 marks the festival's 42nd year. The festival is run by the Hong Kong Arts Festival Society, a non-profit organization. The current executive director of the festival is Tisa Ho.

⁴ 2014 marks the 450th birthday of William Shakespeare, who was born in 1564.

⁵ In Chinese, Romeo is read as LuoMiOu, and hence, in this play, the clan's surname is 'Luo'. Juliet is read as Zhu Li Ye, and therefore the clan's surname is 'Zhu'.

Chinese translation of *Romeo and Juliet*. Rather, this the “Chinese Shakespearean” take on this 420 year old play, as highlighted by the director in the program booklet, and further emphasized when she addressed the audience on stage after the premiere. This paper seeks to explore and discuss this “Chinese-ness” of this play from a ritual perspective.

Religious Connotations

Religion is considered a faith, a belief and an inner experience (Drilling, 2006), while ritual is a set of human actions to display this faith and belief of the religion (Eller, 2007). Many drama performances display the religious experience, some entirely, such as the Ta'ziyeh drama, which is performed yearly during the Muharram to commemorate Imam Hussein's martyrdom (Khan, 1989). Back in ancient Greece, drama was performed to celebrate the Festival of Dionysus, who is the God of Harvest and Wine (Vervain, 2012). On the other hand, some drama performances, such as the Noh Theatre, consists of rituals ceremonies aligned to Shintoism within the play (Nally, 2010). During the medieval period, *The Miracles of Notre Dame*, was a literary performance performed by Gautier De Coinci. The script was made up of stories from the bible. As an interlude, Gautier Di Coinci shared his famous personal story on the *Leocadia's Miracle* (Duys, 2007). It is not uncommon for Shakespeare to discuss religion in his plays. In *Hamlet*, there was a scene where Hamlet got the opportunity to revenge and kill his father's murderer, King Claudius, from his back. Hamlet changed his mind because Claudius was praying to God, and to be killed in prayers would enable Claudius to go to heaven. Hamlet did not want a murder to go to heaven. In this scene of *Hamlet*, a form religious ritual was incorporated (Montgomerie, 1956).

In Tian's version of *Romeo and Juliet*, there are also a number of discussions on the concept of religion, which is relevant to modern China. In one scene, Lao Lunsu (the priest, Friar, in the original story) addressed the audience that religion was long forgotten in this place, and that was why he had taken on another role as a rock singer. Sure enough, the Church in play was a run-down place with no maintenance. If we link this to China, during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s, the practice of religion was completely banned (Lawrance, 2004). While there is religious freedom in China today, the impacts of the ban back then are still evident, as the country has the highest percentage of “convinced atheists” in the world (McGowan, 2013).

Today, the two largest religions in China are Buddhism and Daoism (Woo, 2008). These two religions are duly mentioned in the play. In one scene, Juliet openly declared her love for Romeo and pledged her love for Romeo to the Holy Mother of the West (王母娘娘), who is a highly respected deity in the Daoist religion (Knauner, 2006). In another scene, Romeo performed the act of praying to God in the Church but with the wrong hand gestures. At this point, Lao Lunsu emphasized Romeo's wrong hand gestures and reminded him that he should not be praying to God the same way he prayed to Buddha. Towards the end of the play, when Juliet was forced to marry Secretary Pan (Count Paris in the original story), she blamed her fate for being reincarnated into this family. Reincarnation, is a prominent concept in Buddhism (McClelland, 2010).

Christianity is not spared in this Chinese context. The sign of horns (done by extending the index and last fingers), usually signalled by heavy metal and rock musicians (Nieuwkerk, 2011), was repeatedly displayed by various characters not to display their love for the genre of music, but to signify their belief in and love for God. In this play, this hand sign has become the ritual symbol of love and respect to God. Perhaps the most prominent Christian ritual in this adaptation was the marriage between Romeo and Juliet in the Church. The wedding was presided by Lao Lunsu and witnessed by Kang Huahua (Juliet's personal servant in the original story; portrayed as a male character in this play), who was dressed as a female in that particular scene. The ritual was almost complete, except for the lack of the wedding ring, which is symbolic of the holy union in Christianity (Sanderson, 2014). Nonetheless, Lao Lunsu announced that the union was legal in the presence of God. From these evidences, it can be observed that religion is not taken seriously in this play. Juliet referred to different religions at different points. The sign of horns, which is a common gesture is a heavy metal subculture, was clearly more of a disrespect, than a love for God. Finally, the wedding ritual without the ring as a holy union further suggests the downplaying of the religious ritual.

Chinese Culture and Traditions

In the Egyptian's Ramesseum Drama, many mythological and conventions of the ancient Egyptian culture and beliefs were incorporated. For instance, the dramatic presentation of the coronation of Horus followed

closely to the traditions and the rituals involved in the actual crowning of King Horus, such as the spreading of grain, the sacrifice of the lambs, travelling on a barge and more (Gester, 2008). In this version of *Romeo and Juliet*, there are several elements that suggest the incorporation of Chinese culture and beliefs.

One of the most prominent props used in this play is bicycle. People of both clans travelled around in bicycles as the main form of transportation. As a way to display their hatred for each other, they stole bicycles from one another. Many times, fights happened between the two clans because of the accusations (or proclamations) of the successful theft of the bicycles. Bicycles play an important role in China (Li & Li, 1996). During the early years of Communist rule, the Chinese people strived to own four items, namely the “three rounds and sound” (三件一响). These three rounds include, a wristwatch, bicycle, and sewing machine (Inch, 2012). The sound represents a radio set. The bicycle provided a means to transportation for the common people (mainly the farmers and the workers) at an inexpensive price. It is an item that can be owned and enjoyed by everyone, an ideal aligned to the Communism. From a social perspective back then, bicycles became the main transportation tool for the Chinese people to go to work, for lovers to go on a date, and for parents to send their children to schools. Although in modern China today, where there are lesser bikers, bicycles still perform their role as an important means of transportation in both rural and urban areas. In major cities, there are lanes on roads assigned specifically for bicycles (Li & Li, 1996).

In the scene right after the wedding ceremony in the Church, KangHuahua pulled Romeo and Juliet aside, held on to their hands and thanked the motherland, the party and parents for their unconditional love. This is a very typical custom China where the motherland (China) and the party (the Chinese Communist Party) are given the due appreciation during glorious and happy occasions (Fu, 1993). Another cultural element incorporated in this play is dance. In the scene after Romeo and Juliet had eloped, the members of two clans were in a heated argument. Very quickly, the scene broke out into a rather mismatching dance, which resembles the traditional Xinjiang dance from northwest China. While I am unsure of the cultural significance of this dance to the play, the dance in itself is a Chinese tradition. Perhaps it is the director's attempt to highlight yet another religion in China, which is Islam, the religion of the majority population in Xinjiang (Leavitt, 2007).

In one of the final scenes, Lao Lunsu presented the infamous ‘poison’ to Kang Huahua for Juliet to feign her death. Kang demanded Lao to explain the content of the poison. As Lao prepared to begin his explanation, he started hitting on the wooden bench in front of him to try to get a rhythm. Once the rhythm was established (with the help of Kang), Lao began to rap the ingredients, content and effects of the poison. The rhythm and the rap resemble the traditional Chinese tongue twister with the help of an allegro (快板□□令). The tongue twister with the rhythm is usually performed in the moment of excitement and joy. In that particularly scene, it is surmise to say that Lao was excited as he was confident that his grand plan to bring Romeo and Juliet back together again would be successful.

Brechtian Elements

In a standard Ta'ziyeh drama, both teams of actors playing the good (Imam Hussein and his followers) and the bad (Yazid's army) break out of their characters whenever they are first on stage. Whether they play the good or the evil roles, all actors pay respects and show their devotion for Imam Hussein right from the beginning. This is to prevent the audience from believing and thinking badly of the actors, who play the evil roles. Even when the actors are playing their roles, they are never deep into the character. There is no attempt to “act well”. The audience are very familiar with the roles in Ta'ziyeh drama, as they are symbolic of Iman Hussein, the religious and spiritual leader, who lost his life in the last battle of Karbala. Some characters get killed during the battle and they immediately become the audience. Sometimes, the stage manager appears on stage to pass props to the actors (Malekpour, 2004). According to German director, Bertolt Brecht, such deliberate actions to remind the audience that they are watching a drama play is the *Alienation Effect*. By making the audience uncomfortable through the breaking of certain theatrical norms, the audience are immediately forced to think about the particular scene or message at that point in time (Osnes, 2001).

Romeo and Juliet is a familiar story. Most of the audience probably know about the story prior to watching the play. At the very least, most people should know that Romeo and Juliet were in a forbidden love because of their families' conflicts. And in the end, Juliet feigned her death so that she could avoid marrying the man

she disliked and continued to be together with Romeo. Romeo, on the other hand, thought that Juliet was really dead and consumed a bottle of real poison. It is a tragic ending. One of the significant items in this play is the bottle of 'fake' poison, which was meant for Juliet. In this version of *Romeo and Juliet*, Lao Linsi appeared on stage, carefully holding the bottle of 'fake' poison. He then addressed the audience, informing them that the bottle of poison was the infamous poison in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Lao also expected Kang Huahua to treat the bottle of poison with respect and hold the bottle properly as the poison was an extremely important item in this play. In this case, the bottle of poison becomes a ritual item, not just because of its importance to the development of this play, but also the audience's prior understanding of its importance to the development of this play. In this case, there is a common belief between the audience and the characters.

There are many other Brechtian moments in this play. Right before the play began, the stage manager's announcement to the cast members could be heard by all the audience, including the parts where he asked the cast members to standby and get ready. As the cast members appeared on stage, there was no blackout and everyone could clearly see the actors getting ready in their positions, and with their necessary props. During the scenes where some actors are not performing, they remained on stage, and from the audience's perspective, the actors were clearly resting and at some points, they were watching the play from their positions. One actor was even looking at his mobile phone on stage. Other Brechtian moments include a phone conversation scene, where the two characters were standing very close to each other. Nonetheless, one of the characters clarified that the two of them were actually not in the same 'space' and hence, could not see each other.

Conclusion

This paper discusses several rituals in this "Chinese Shakespeare" version of *Romeo and Juliet*, linking ideas and theories from other ritualistic and/ or religious performances. Prior to the discussion on Brechtian moments, two main issues were explored in this paper – religion and culture (and traditions). In this version of the play, it is evident that there are quite a number of religious connotations, yet the play is set in a time where religion is no longer believed by many. This can be associated to the current situation of religious belief in China. To further explore the "Chinese-ness" of this play, I have also discussed the incorporation of Chinese cultural and traditional elements into this play as a form of ritual expression. For instance, the cultural significance of bicycles in China can be an adequate explanation as to why bicycles are used as the main prop in this play. If we look at this love story against the context of downplaying religion in this play, perhaps the Brechtian moments are meant for audience to think about love as the overarching religion of humankind. Aren't we all trying to understand love? In the scene where Romeo and Juliet first kissed, they were in a heavy metal and rock music party. In many other scenes, some Korean language was used. In the context of culture and traditions, the Brechtian moments might encourage the audience to think about how K-pop and Korean drama have influenced Chinese culture and traditions in modern China. Perhaps also, Juliet's boldness in expressing her love for Romeo, reflects the youths' move towards gender equality in China.

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