

*Chineseness in Recreating Ibsen:
Peer Gynt in China and Its Adaptations*

Ibsen was introduced to China about one hundred years ago, first as a champion of individualism, when the Chinese were in need of a new identity after the collapse of Confucianism. Ibsen's individualism gave the Chinese a source for a new identity, in which a person could define him/herself as an individual, free to choose and have the right to defy social impositions. Against such a background, Ibsen's plays such as *An Enemy of the People*, *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts* became popular in China in the early twentieth century because of their radical social messages for the Chinese revolution that changed China from dynastic rule to modern democracy. For such a change, drastic reformation had to occur in politics as well as in culture, especially in people's concept of the self and nation.

In the early years of reception in the 1910s-1940s, *Peer Gynt* was not considered representative of Ibsen's social ideas and hence did not attract the attention of the Chinese in days of cultural turmoil. Later in the early years of socialist China, *Peer Gynt* was condemned for promoting the idea of "thyselfishness," which only trolls, not human beings, would adopt as a philosophy of life (Xiao 1949: 5, Tam 1986: 210-211, Tam 2001: 129). As Peer says,

The Gyntish *self* – it is that host
of wants, desires that stir one most, –
the Gyntish *self*, – it is a sea
of whims and needs and urgency,
whatever stirs *my* breast precisely,
and thereby makes me live – concisely.
But as our Lord has need of dust
to ply his art as world-creator,
even so for me, gold is a must
if I'm to look the imperator.
(*Peer Gynt*, 2007: 58)

Peer Gynt, however, has got a new fortune in post-Socialist China as a result of the critique of collectivism and the rediscovery of the new individualist self

(Tam 2001: 163–164). The play was for the first time fully translated into Chinese in 1978 and since then staged several times in different styles, making it very much a regular performance in today's Chinese theatre repertoire. Compared with *A Doll's House*, which has been an all-time favourite of the Chinese stage, *Peer Gynt* has undergone different receptions in China. Why have the Chinese responded so differently to the two plays? What has *Peer Gynt* to do with traditional Chinese values, politics and theatre arts?

The Chinese have had an ambivalent attitude towards *Peer Gynt* for several reasons. In traditional Chinese values, filial piety is considered the most important of all virtues of a person, and hence it is believed that a son should not abandon his duties toward his parents. Peer apparently is not a filial son and is against the traditional Chinese values in his purposeless travels away from home, during which he has learnt to become a rogue. In his dialogue with the trolls, what he has learnt is to be true to himself only:

That separates humans, in rough,
from trolls – it says: “Troll, be thyself enough!”
(*Peer Gynt*, 2007, p. 110)

Peer's idea of “to be thyself enough” has been considered unacceptable to the Chinese because a person is supposed to place the family and state before his self-interests. Hence, in the early twentieth century when the Chinese intellectuals were so keen in promoting the ideas of Romantic iconoclasm and individualism in the quest for a new identity, the values represented by *Peer Gynt* were seen to be anti-social and anti-state. Furthermore, “to be thyself enough” was equated with “to be thyself-ish,” hence making the idea running counter to the age-old Chinese values of selflessness and to the rising socialist-collectivist ideology in China in the early twentieth century.

Chineseness in Adaptations of *Peer Gynt*

When China finally broke away from the taboos of socialism in the late 1970s, a new reception of *Peer Gynt* began. Peer's adventures abroad were seen not as negative, but in line with China's new open-door policy. Peer's final insistence on his “self” when he was threatened by the Button-Moulder was hailed as an antidote to the sickening collectivist identity practised during socialism. Xiao Qian (1910–1999) was the first to advocate a new post-Socialist identity based on an individualistic concept of the self, which according to him could be

likened to Peer's idea of "to be thyself" (Xiao, 1949, p. 5). In the post-Socialist era, to have a human self as distinguished from the troll-self of being "thyself enough" is not only considered necessary, but also taken as positive in asserting one's self-integrity in upholding beliefs and principles. For this reason, Xiao Qian translated the complete *Peer Gynt* into Chinese and ardently promoted it for the concept of self-integrity. The play was for the first time performed in China by the Central Academy of Drama in 1983, with Xu Xiaozhong as director. Although this was the first Chinese performance of *Peer Gynt*, it was widely acclaimed as an innovation in modern Chinese stage art.

Unlike most Chinese performances of Ibsen, the performance of *Peer Gynt* was an adaptation based on images taken from the sixteenth-century Chinese novel *Journey to the West* (Xiyouji). For example, the Dovre-King was presented in the image of Pigsy (Zhu Bajie). When *Peer Gynt* was recreated in the Chinese classic folk tale of *Journey to the West*, it carried with it all the positive cultural connotations associated with the mythological heroic figures in Chinese history, such as the Monkey King. In traditional Chinese culture as well as contemporary Chinese politics, the Monkey King has represented a heroic quality of supernatural power fighting against evil spirits. In *Journey to the West*, the Monkey King is the main disciple of Tripitaka (Xuanzang) who escorts him in his pilgrimage to India in Tang Dynasty (A. D. 618–907) of ancient China. In contemporary Chinese politics, it was Mao Zedong who used the image of the Monkey King to romanticize the revolutionaries in their mission to fight against demonic counter-revolutionaries. Hence, to present *Peer Gynt* in the images of the heroic figures from *Journey to the West* was to re-contextualize it and reinvent it as a Chinese story.

In Xu Xiaozhong's adaptation, *Peer Gynt* was given a new interpretation in his rediscovery of the human self, as the Button-Moulder explains to Peer:

To be oneself is: oneself to slay.
 But on you that's a waste of an explanation;
 so let's put it like this: above all, to obey
 the Master's intention without hesitation.
 (*Peer Gynt*, 2007: 112)

Similar to Peer's redemption, the Monkey King was originally a half-beast half-human creature with a very strong ego defying all rules and principles in the universe, but he finally repents and is awakened to the role of serving his Buddhist master Tripitaka. Against the background after the collapse of the

disastrous Cultural Revolution in 1976, *Peer Gynt* was performed with the hope of redeeming the revolutionary spirit in China by asserting the positive value of a new awakening to self-integrity. In Xu Xiaozhong's own words, the play was an experiment in presenting "another side of Ibsen, which was unknown to the Chinese audience" (Xu 1983: 44). The allegorical theme and the spectacular stage effects in the style of Peking opera presented an entirely new Ibsen on the Chinese stage. Although the play was performed in prose dialogue, much of it resembled a Peking opera. Unlike other Ibsen performances in China, Xu Xiaozhong's *Peer Gynt* was the first Chinese attempt in localizing and sinicizing Ibsen by giving it a flavour of Chineseness. It was also the first attempt in presenting it in the style of traditional Chinese drama. In this process, a Western classic was turned into part of the national repertoire in the Chinese theatre.

Because of the success of Xu Xiaozhong's experiment, several other later attempts since the 2000s have adopted a similar policy of incorporating elements of Peking opera and the story of the Monkey King in representing a sinicized *Peer Gynt*, making the play more like a Chinese drama than a Western one. In the Peking opera adaptations of *Peer Gynt*, performed by the Shanghai Theatre Academy in 2005 and 2007 respectively, there were uses of visual devices and symbols to depict characters and scenes (Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4) that were meant to present the Chinese elements in a prominent style without sacrificing the Norwegian original.



Figure 1. Peer presented in the image of Monkey King, *Peer Gynt*, Shanghai 2005

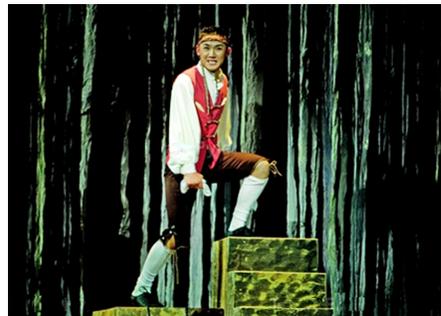


Figure 2. Peer presented in the image of Monkey King, *Peer Gynt*, Shanghai 2007



Figure 3. The Dovre King presented in the image of the Barbarian King, *Peer Gynt*, Shanghai 2005



Figure 4. The Dovre King presented in the image of the Barbarian King, *Peer Gynt*, Shanghai 2007

Both the Monkey King and the Barbarian King are familiar figures on the stage of Peking opera, while a young man facing tests during his adventures is a theme that cautions the Chinese about difficulties in life abroad. For audience not familiar with Norwegian literature, the play might pass as a Chinese drama with the Monkey King searching for his identity in his adventures and encountering trolls in his journey to the West. The stage design (Figures 5 and 6), though modernized, was full of Chinese symbols. The trees and the wooden houses (Figure 5) were symbolic of the scenery in Norway, but they also looked very Chinese. The moon (Figure 6) was universal, but in the Chinese context it conveyed a sense of home-sickness when Peer was abroad.

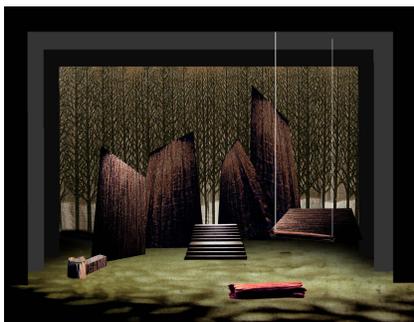


Figure 5. The stage design of *Peer Gynt*, Shanghai 2007

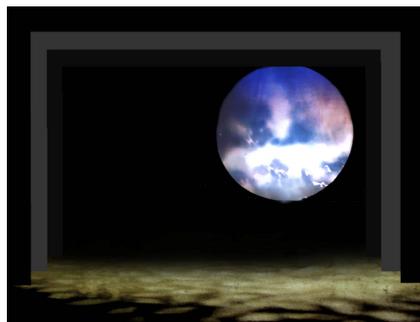


Figure 6. The stage design of *Peer Gynt*, Shanghai 2007

Westernization of Chinese Drama

For the sophisticated audience, one thing making *Peer Gynt* different from a traditional Chinese drama is that there is psychological depth in the portrayal of Peer, while in traditional Chinese drama there is the lack of psychological treatment of characters. But in *Peer Gynt* there are encounters with the unknown in the form of a riddle-dialogue, which are meant to test Peer's sense of self and its psychological makeup:

PEER: Who are you? Answer!
 VOICE: (*in the darkness*) Myself.
 PEER: Stand aside!
 VOICE: Go round about, Peer! For the fells here are wide.
 PEER: (*tries another route but runs into something*) Who are you?
 VOICE: Myself. Can you say the like?
 PEER: I can say what I please; and my sword can strike!
 Look out! Way heigh!
 And here comes the knockout!
 King Saul slew hundreds, Peer Gynt knocked the lot out!
 (*hacks and smites*) Who are you?
 VOICE: Myself.
 (*Peer Gynt*, 2007: 36)

The Chinese adaptation of *Peer Gynt* in the style of Peking opera is a process of localizing Ibsen and sinicizing a Western classic, but it can also be considered as an attempt in adopting Western elements for a Chinese repertoire. In this sense, the characterization of Peer with psychological complexities makes it an entirely new and enriching experience for the Chinese stage.

The highly stylized formulaic acting with masks in Peking opera remained in the 2005 and 2007 adaptations of *Peer Gynt*, but it also served to distinguish the characters into types. Because of the need to create a stage that could capture Norwegian scenery, the stage design had to be realistic though it was also symbolic. Hence, the adaptation of *Peer Gynt* served a two-fold purpose of sinicizing a Western classic and at the same time also Westernizing Chinese drama, by earning the play a formal place in the repertoire of the Chinese theatre.

A more obvious example of Westernizing the Chinese theatre can be found in the scene when Peer is seduced by the Green Clad Woman. Such a scene of sexual affair can hardly be presented on a traditional Chinese stage. However, this is necessary in *Peer Gynt*, as it is a test of Peer's desires and his lack of self:

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- DOVRE: You'll just have to wed her. 1040
 PEER: You mean to say – ?
 DOVRE: What? Deny that you led her
 astray with your lustings, seduced her, alas?
 PEER: (*snorts*) Is that all? Who the devil bears that grudge in mind?
 DOVRE: Human beings are all of a kind.
 You acknowledge the soul in a cack-handed fashion;
 but it's what you can grab that arouses your passion.
 So you think, then, seduction's a trifle, my laddie?
 Soon you'll have proof that it's not, you wait –
 PEER: You're not hooking me with your lying bait!
 GREEN: Before the year's out Peer, you'll be a Daddy.
 (*Peer Gynt, 2007, p. 36*)

In the Chinese adaptation of *Peer Gynt*, the Green Clad Woman seducing Peer was presented in the form of a dance with body movement full of intimate contacts to suggest sexual activities (Figure 7). This can be compared to the same scene in the Gålå performance of *Peer Gynt* in 2005, in which similar postures of body contact were presented (Figure 8).



Figure 7. Peer and the Green Clad Woman, *Peer Gynt*, Shanghai, 2007



Figure 8. Peer and the Greenclad Woman, *Peer Gynt*, Gålå, Norway, 2005

Apparently the presentation of a sexual scene on the Chinese stage deviated from the traditional theatre practice and served the function of Westernizing and modernizing traditional Chinese drama.

When Aase is dying, Peer carries her on his back. This is a very touching scene the Chinese audiences would approve of, demonstrating Peer's love for his mother though he has been travelling abroad neglecting his filial duties. In both the Chinese adaptation (Figure 9) and the Norwegian performance (Figure 10), the scene was presented as Peer's repentance:

But your eyes – why they bulge like a dead thing's!
 Have you passed away Ma, so soon – !
(goes to the head of the bed)
 You mustn't just lie there, staring! –
 Speak Ma; it's me, your son!
*(feels her brow and hands cautiously; then he drops the cord
 on the chair and says quietly)*
 Ah well! – Grane, rest from your faring;
 for right now the journey's done.
(closing her eyes and bending over her)
 Thanks, Ma, for the cuddling and spanking,
 for all of your life beside! –
 But now it's your turn to be thanking –
(puts his cheek to her mouth)
 so there – that was thanks for the ride.
 [...]

 Hush; she is dead.
 [...]

 See mother is decently buried.
 I must try to escape the net.
(Peer Gynt, 2007: 51–52)



Figure 9. Peer carrying his dying Mother Aase, *Peer Gynt*, Shanghai 2007



Figure 10. Peer carrying his dying Mother Aase, *Peer Gynt*, Gäddede, 2005

The scene of a repenting son showing regret for having neglected the duties toward his mother is a theme explored in many cultures, and here it was preserved in the Chinese adaptation and made one of the highlights in the performance. This is also the moment of self-condemnation and awakening in the Monkey King image of Peer in the Chinese adaptation.

As John Northam has pointed out, the ending when Peer seeks spiritual salvation in his rediscovery of his abandoned love Solveig is a scene of self-awakening:

in which, for the first time, we hear the voice of genuine selfawareness, of genuine contrition. Peer's language here is at its barest, its most honest when he asks "Where was I, as myself, the whole man, the real, Where was I with my forehead marked with God's seal?" The emphasis of the ending is not on a facile salvation but on the challenge it poses, both for Peer and for the reader, to recognise the alternative way of life that should be followed rather than that of egotistical self-satisfaction.

(*Peer Gynt*, 2007: 4)

Such an ending condemning "egotistical self-satisfaction" is in line with the Chinese tradition and is more welcome to the audience than mere aesthetic rendering into an acceptable form of Chinese performance.

Recent Chinese Reception of *Peer Gynt*

Other than the Peking opera adaptations, there was an attempt in the year 2009 to stage *Peer Gynt* in the style of modern speech drama, in which the popular movie stars, Sun Haiying and Lu Liping, played the lead roles. This performance began as a huge commercial success in Beijing and in the following year it was performed again in a tour around China, first in Shanghai and later in other medium-sized cities. In the adaptation, the play was turned into a comic performance exaggerating the egotism of Peer in contrast to his redemption at the end. The costumes showed a strong resemblance between this Chinese adaptation and *Pirates of the Caribbean*, with the intention to single out the image of Peer as a disobedient son and a *pícaro*. In its later staging by China's Chengde Drama Company, also starring Sun Haiying and Lu Liping, in Sydney, Australia in 2011 the adaptation remained much the same as its 2010 version, though there were minor changes in scenery and a Chinese version of *Amazing Grace* was added at the end.

Much of the dialogue, as well as the body gestures of Peer, adopted comic devices used the Chinese crosstalk (*xiang sheng*) performance, which were similar to those in a standup comedy (Figure 11). This adaptation of *Peer Gynt* represents the latest Chinese efforts in experimentation that tries to make it modern, comical and Chinese (Figure 12). The performance programme provided the following notes to describe the Chinese adaptation:

It illustrates the adventures of a man named Peer Gynt. He is a character, who flees from commitment, and who is completely selfish; having little concern for the sacrifices that others are forced to make in accommodating him. Norwegian writer Henrik Ibsen's use of satire and a self-centered protagonist thus explores the social implications in a 19th century society.

(“Peer Gynt Will Be Touring Australia in July 11.”)



Figure 11. Peer and Mother Aase, *Peer Gynt*, Shanghai 2010



Figure 12. Peer and the Greenclad Woman, *Peer Gynt*, Shanghai 2010

The final scene (Figures 13 and 14) with Peer's repentance was presented in a different way from that of the Peking opera adaptation. In this 2009/2010 adaptation, the female lead played both roles of Mother Aase and Solveig, the lover once abandoned by Peer. Since both Mother Aase and Solveig, as presented here, had the same look, it offered an association of the mother-lover figure in the same person. The attempt has the purpose of bringing out the message, as John Northam has insightfully pointed out:

Indeed the ending has an aura of splendour about it – the sun rises as Solveig's song ends; but Peer's desperate demand to be taken into Solveig's protective womb has a biblical source that raises the question of whether, after such behaviour, there can be any such sanctuary left. Peer's frantic desire to enter into Solveig's womb calls up a memory of Nicodemus's question: "Is it possible for a man in his old age to re-enter his mother's womb and be reborn?" Peer lies inert as the question is raised: *Can* he be saved, even by Solveig's faith, hope and charity. (*Peer Gynt*, 2007, p. 4)

Solveig is thus a visual reincarnation of Mother Aase. In making up for his neglected duties toward his mother, Peer also compensated Solveig with his firm love. In the Chinese adaptation, the song *Amazing Grace* was played in the final scene. In the Sydney production, the song was played after it was sung in Chinese by a female voice. The lyrics in English could be heard when Peer knelt on the

stage to show his repentance, but for the Chinese audiences who did not know English, the song sounded very much like Buddhist chanting:

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind but now I see.

There was perhaps a hidden intention to turn the Christian message into a Buddhist one with an emphasis on “forgiveness” for Chinese consumption.



Figure 13. Final scene with Peer’s repentance. *Peer Gynt*, Shanghai 2010. *Amazing Grace* was played with Peer and Solveig retreated from the stage.



Figure 14. Peer and Solveig, seeking redemption. *Peer Gynt*, Shanghai 2010. *Amazing Grace* was played when Peer repented.

Both adaptations, the one in Peking opera style and the one in modern speech drama, were post-Socialist productions that were not confined by any political frameworks. Intercultural elements were incorporated in performance and were meant to enrich the stage experience, while Chinese elements were added in an attempt to claim ownership of the play in the Chinese repertoire. The image of Peer, from that of the Monkey King to the Caribbean pirate, signifies a

change in the Chinese conception of a prodigal son who finally repents. The theme of overseas adventures has always been fascinating to the Chinese audience who has an appetite for knowledge of things outside China but is always satisfied with enjoyments of domestic life. The warm reception of the 2009/2000 adaptation emphasizing overseas adventures and repentance over prodigy is, in a sense, a reflection of the desire for globalization in China today.

A trend of intercultural and interracial performance can be discerned in most recent Chinese adaptations of Ibsen. For example, in the 2006 Chinese-Norwegian performance of *A Doll's House* directed by Wu Xiaojiang, Nora was represented as a Norwegian woman who married a Chinese husband Helmer and their conflicts arose as a result of tensions between Norwegian feminist values and the Chinese patriarchal tradition. The participation of a Norwegian actress in a Chinese performance was meant to highlight racial and cultural differences. To racialize Nora was to racialize feminism and contain it within Western cultures, so was the Chinese Helmer treated as an attempt in racializing Chinese patriarchal values. In the 2010 dance-drama *A Doll's House* with Jin Xing playing Nora and Un-Magritt Nordseth being the choreographer, there was the inclusion of both Chinese and Norwegian actors on the stage, so that the performance became intercultural and interracial. In both adaptations, the languages of Chinese and English were used on the stage. Such productions were meant to be interlingual too, so as to cater to the taste of an international audience that has emerged in China today and also claim an ownership of the play in its internationalized reinvention.

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