

# SECRET LOVE OF PEACH BLOSSOM LAND: INTERCULTURAL PERFORMANCE IN DRAMA

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## ABSTRACT

This study analysis the evolution of drama through intercultural theatre performance, utilizing Richard Schechner's theory of intercultural performance, and highlighting the contrast between Western realism and Eastern aesthetics in staging. The research used Secret love of peach blossom land as a case study of intercultural performance within a global cultural context. The study seeks to ascertain how Chinese theatre performance has reinvented through the incorporation of many cultural aspects and the facilitation of worldwide intercultural contact.

**Keywords:** Drama, Richard Schechner's performance theory, culture.

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the conclusion of the 20th century, intercultural aesthetics, encompassing versions of Shakespeare and Brecht, have profoundly transformed Chinese drama. Consequently, Chinese theater performance should engage with intercultural and international theater.

The objective of this study is to investigate a case study of interculturalism in theatre performance as a medium for intercultural communication within a globalized cultural framework. This study employs qualitative research methodology: content analysis and video observation, within the theoretical framework of Richard Schechner's principles of intercultural performance. This study analysis the dual narratives, intercultural themes, multicultural performance frameworks, and intercultural moments in *Secret love of peach blossom land*, aiming to identify innovative theatrical methods for intercultural communication and spaces, to reconcile Eastern and Western performance traditions and multiculturalism, and to contribute to modern Chinese drama.

## BACKGROUND

### *Secret love of peach blossom land*

*Peach blossom land* is a utopian mythological setting depicted in the writings of Tao Yuanming, a traditional Chinese author, in his work *Secret love of peach blossom land* (Seetoo, 2021). This picturesque setting, where humanity and environment coexist in concord, has emerged as a potent metaphor for the quest for an ideal, harmonious existence.

*Secret love* is set in 1949, during the establishment of New China, when a young couple is apart. *Peach blossom land*, conversely, is set in ancient China, when a fisherman, forsaken by his wife and landowner, on a voyage and discovers the legendary *Peach blossom land* (TFORD, 2007).

*Secret love of peach blossom land* debuted in 1986 (Lai, 2022, p19). The *New York Times* commended

Stan Lai 's play, where laughter transitions into tears, prompting the audience to reflect on the significance of memory (TFORD, 2007).

### **CHARACTERS**

In *Secret love*, Jiang Binliu is a romantic and sensual figure whose affection for his first love, Yun Zhifan, endures for decades. Subsequent to his separation from Yun, Jiang joins into a conventional Chinese marriage with Mrs. Jiang. In his later years, Jiang ultimately reestablishes his connection with Yun by confronting his emotions, aided by a cheery and energetic caregiver.

In *Peach Blossom Land*, Tao, a fisherman who reaches the lovely *Peach Blossom Land* following a shipwreck, demonstrates resourcefulness, persistence, and courage in matters of love. His relationship with his vivacious and pragmatic wife, Chunhua, is characterized by misunderstandings and inflated disputes.

### **INTERCULTURAL PERFORMANCE**

Intercultural performance explores how power and identity are negotiated and challenged in intercultural exchanges, encompassing topics like embodied culture, transnational identities, and globalization, with a focus on the role of performance in intercultural dynamics (Martin,2004). Intercultural pertains to the interaction between two or more cultures, rather than individuals. Intercultural performances highlight shared connections as well as distinct separations (Grosskopf & Barmeyer, 2021).

Intercultural theatre performance explores and celebrates diverse cultural perspectives and experiences, fostering dialogue and understanding through theatrical mediums, often involving collaborations between artists of different backgrounds (Schechner, 2013, p263).

### **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

For a century, the Chinese-speaking community has been observing contemporary Western drama. Chinese theater performance lacks a contemporary theatrical paradigm and has primarily focused on refining its esteemed classical styles while assimilating Western plays (Gordon, 2023). Much of America's cultural production has been intercultural, with its theater significantly impacted by Asia and Europe (Dong & Ruan, 2023).

This indicates that globalization undermines the cultural essence of the nation. Practitioners simplify ancient arts and rituals and completely forsake indigenous cultural practices in favor of rapid globalization, sometimes characterized by Westernization or a form of "world culture" (Schechner, 2013, p270). The performing arts in underdeveloped nations, particularly Chinese drama, have significant challenges. Therefore, the issue of intercultural applicability of Chinese theatre performance requires immediate resolution.

The resolution to the aforementioned issue necessitates balancing cultural autonomy with national sovereignty, while also averting the incursion of more populous and geographically expansive civilizations and the obliteration of smaller ones. The authentic emotions elicited by the global localization of the sociodramatic replica *Temple of penance* underscore the necessity for direct engagement and interaction as a countermeasure to the alienation and uniformity of global culture.

The objective of intercultural dramas like this is to depict the challenges of human interactions without not preserving the form or substance of the indigenous culture.

Fortunately, Stan Lai has provided the Chinese with a contemporary theater, the paramount value of which lies in its representation of his nation, region, and populace - *Secret love of peach blossom land*. *Secret love of peach blossom land* was selected for study due to its capacity to explore the tension between local cultural distinctiveness and global culture. It is valuable to examine the diverse

intercultural components that are referenced, adapted, condensed, enhanced, amalgamated, and blended in this drama. The play's intercultural narrative evolves into an unintended and quasi-surrealist experience of cultural fragmentation, facilitating an exploration of the significance of theatre performance for interculturalism.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

*Secret love of peach blossom land*'s narrative technique has garnered scholarly attention, with consensus that the interaction between the dual tales underscores the absurdities and contradictions of existence through the simultaneous presentation of both narratives on stage (Tan, 2023). This method contests conventional theater by inviting the audience to engage in a complex tale.

Western researchers, including Fischer-Lichte, focus on Stan Lai's use of theatrical time and space to merge the past with the present (Ferrari, 2020, p141). Their research offers essential concepts for the examination of intercultural performance, such as the director's employment of inter-temporal stagecraft to contrast cultural memory.

Integrating the research of the aforementioned researchers, this study utilizes Richard Schechner's performance theory of intercultural performance as the basis for the investigation. Schechner contends that longitudinal study aims to identify "original" or "truly" universal performances by integrating historical cultural practices with individual "deep" experiences (Schechner, 2013, p264). Conversely, horizontal studies aim to identify cross-cultural or universal "truths" through the parallels present in modern culture (Schechner, 2013, p264). This study will illustrate that theatre performance can embody cultural diversity and that individuals might own a "culture of choice."

Since the late 1970s, Gómez Peña has amalgamated urban popular theater, magical realism, kabuki, and American multimedia to deconstruct monoculture (Schechner, 2013, p316). This dramatic genre prioritizes movement and audience engagement. Peter Brook's translation of the epic Mahabharata, characterized by its mostly Western performance style, may be regarded as "intercultural" (Mounivong, 2024, p38). Kuo Pao Kun contends that "open culture" signifies that the fundamental aspects of the fostering process are no longer anchored in ethnicity or limited to biculturalism and bilingualism, but necessitate a qualitative advancement on a global scale (Wee, 2020).

In summary, prior comprehensive analyses of *Secret love of peach blossom land* have focused on the framework of modern Chinese drama and inventive narrative strategies. This study will investigate theatre performance through the lens of intercultural performance theory and assess how the play transcends cultural borders to resonate with global audiences.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes Richard Schechner's theory of performance as a theoretical framework for intercultural performance principles.

The research utilizes qualitative technique, incorporating case study, with primary instruments being script analysis and video observation. The objective of the study is to examine the interconnection between intercultural dynamics and theatre performance.

### Script analysis

This study uses script analysis to investigate the cultural resonance of characters, focusing on the nuances of cultural traditions and socio-historical contexts by studying their personalities, emotions, and social representations.

### Dual narratives achieve intercultural resonance

The play presents two concurrent theatre performances that interlace the narratives of both works, differing in tone, style, and cultural symbols, but discreetly reflecting each other's profound themes. This study analyzes the narrative structure of the theatre performances presented in the table below.

**Table 1** Dual-narrative structure

No.	Narrative structure	Secret love	Peach blossom land
1	Element	A poignant narrative of contemporary romance situated within the context of China's tumultuous history.	An ancient Chinese utopian comedic romance derived from Tao Yuanming.
2	Space-time	Historical trauma serves as an impediment to love, causing prolonged separations between partners.	The observer is introduced to a utopian existence that transcends conventional temporality.
3	Culture	It blends Western realistic theater with traditional Chinese aesthetics.	Utilizing classical Chinese literature and traditional Chinese opera.
4	Intercultural resonance	Emotional ties of personal and communal cultural memory.	The universal human need for love represents an idealistic, elusive form of happiness.

The intertwining of tragic and comic themes in the theatre performances provokes intercultural reflection: denouncing idealized nostalgia and the modern pursuit of hedonistic pleasures.

### INTERCULTURAL THEMES

The play address's universal themes of love, memory, and utopia, linking human experiences to broader socio-historical contexts. This study examines the aforementioned intercultural memories through a comparative analysis of the two theatre performances presented in the table below.

**Table 2** Intercultural theme: memory

No.	Elements	Secret love	Peach blossom land
1	Line	Jiang: "Some moments you never forget."	Tao: "Wuling is Wuling! Ah! Wuling is? It's...." (He tries to remember but can't tell)
2	Intercultural connection	Resonance of collective national cultural trauma (e.g., Love lost to war and displacement).	Evoking cultural memories that surpass temporal and spatial boundaries through the esteemed utopian existence.

The major theme of the play's dual narrative is love. In the play, love is shown as both a sorrowful yearning and a comedic vexation. This study includes a table analyzing the major characters' opinions of the intricacy and universality of love across various cultural situations.

**Table 3** Intercultural theme: love

No.	Elements	Secret love	Peach blossom land
1	Line	Jiang: " After you leave, I'll write you a letter every day." (Stan Lai , 2006).	Tao: " What kind of home is this? You can't buy medicine for a day and still can't get it back, what kind of home is this? " (Stan Lai , 2006).
2	Intercultural connection	Love in the world cannot endure the trials of time and distance; separation only inflicts greater anguish and complexity upon the relationship.	Life's truth demonstrates that the majority of marriage disputes among the average individual arise from disorder and miscommunication within the household, potentially resulting in the loss of love.

Loss is a dominant emotional motif for the characters in the play, and this sentiment is manifested in their dramatic portrayals. This study analysis the intercultural representation of loss in two theatre performances, as illustrated in the table below.

**Table 4** Intercultural theme: loss

No.	Elements	Secret love	Peach blossom land
1	Line	Jiang (admitting to Yun on his deathbed): " You remain beautiful even in old age. " (Stan Lai , 2006).	Tao: "Disregard Boss Yuan! ...Disregard Chunhua! " (Stan Lai , 2006).
2	Intercultural connection	A Chinese saying states that a shattered mirror cannot be restored. Love is fractured, and even after reuniting years later, Jiang and Yun remain unable to move on.	Tao's shift of demeanor towards his wife and Yuan's superior illustrates the disillusionment individuals have in human connections and their desire to escape the burdens of reality.

The emotional resonance experienced by the audience in the two theatre performances demonstrates that both modern and traditional cultures may express emotions and existential themes through realism or escapist intercultural performance.

### VIDEO OBSERVATION

The analysis of video observation of *Secret love of peach blossom land* centers on the methodologies of theatre performance (director & actors) and the persistent intercultural motifs in theatrical presentations across many eras and cultural settings.

### MULTICULTURAL PERFORMANCE STRUCTURES

The multicultural performance framework of *Secret love of peach blossom land* is evident in the director's amalgamation of cross-generational cultural components from realist play and opera. It emphasizes the fusion of modern Chinese aesthetics with ancient oriental aesthetics in the performing arts, along with

the principles articulated in Richard Schechner's theory of intercultural performance.

**Table 5** Secret love: performance style

No.	Performance Style	Secret love
1	Techniques	Actors employ the Stanislavski acting system, which prioritizes personal experience to establish a connection with the character and promotes the expression of exterior actions through internal experience.
2	Emotional expression	The actor portraying Jiang used silent, hesitant line delivery alongside symbolic body language to describe Jiang's mental struggle about Yun, expressing yearning, remorse, and nostalgia for love.
3	Cultural symbol	In the last scene, the characters' attire shifts from Republican tunics and cheongsams to Western blouses and skirts, illustrating the evolution of dress culture from tradition to modernity over time.
		In the backdrop of the stage, both simplified and traditional characters are present in Taiwan's newspapers, although Shanghai's newspapers exclusively utilize simplified characters at this time, illustrating cultural memory across generations and regions.

**Table 6** Peach blossom land: performance style

No.	Performance Style	Peach blossom land
1	Techniques	It integrates traditional Chinese opera, classical dance, and operatic techniques. The characterization method employs the exaggerated, programmatic style of opera, focusing on the characters' exterior actions rather than their underlying emotions.
2	Emotional expression	Tao's character employs exaggerated movements, humorous facial expressions, and vocal modulation to enhance the character's comedic sensibility and generate absurdity.
3	Cultural symbol	The characters don attire representative of the general populace in old Chinese folklore; the dialogue is derived from the literary style of Tao Yuanming, reflecting an homage to traditional culture. All of the aforementioned exemplify the conventional customs and philosophies of Taoist culture.

The two tableaux examined above illustrate that the distinct groups of actors effortlessly transition between divergent performance styles, embodying the multicultural expression of contemporary theater. Both conveyed the themes of love and loss in contemporary Chinese history through *Secret love*, and associated the performance with traditional cultural memory in *Peach blossom land*.

This intercultural performance technique synthesizes and harmonizes diverse cultural traditions, merging psychological realism with physical augmentation. The multicultural performance framework

amalgamates Western realistic performance techniques with Eastern aesthetics, and the interplay of these two styles exemplifies the intercultural exchange of theatrical traditions, thereby eliciting intercultural resonance among the live audience.

### INTERCULTURAL MOMENT

The play's director employs modern Western performance methods tailored to ancient Chinese culture, merging Chinese cultural narratives with global theatrical frameworks. The director adeptly employs stage time and space to construct a metatheatrical staging, utilizing the metatheatrical framework to reveal the two rehearsed performances, while the presence of the director's crew delineates the two theatrical presentations, allowing the audience an opportunity for contemplation. Metatheatre serves as a commentary on the intrinsic essence of theater, characterized by chaos, collaboration, and reflection (Allen, 2022, p22). This study references and examine two dramatic incidents.

### PLAY WITHIN A PLAY

In act I, the actors are rehearsing the narrative of Jiang and Yun's imminent separation caused by the war, but the director abruptly halts the rehearsal owing to the inadequate portrayal of the two actors' internal emotions. The plot's setting creates an interstitial effect, immediately grounding the audience in the profound contemplation of love's separation.

The primary function of this interstitial effect is to situate the present and the past simultaneously, allowing for dialectical reflection, so establishing a intercultural connection between them. The dialogues of the characters are presented below.

Director (Walking to the front stage): " From a historical point of view... Huangpu River in Shanghai... You should have a feeling that a great change is coming... Jiang, to the next scene, when you are old, lying in a hospital bed, you have no memories do you understand? " (Stan Lai, 2006).

By incorporating the director's guidance of the actors into the performance through the "play within a play" technique, obscuring the distinctions between fact and fiction, the intercultural moment is manifested in three key aspects: firstly, the director emphasized the importance of historical "accuracy" and emotional authenticity; secondly, the director references nostalgic elements, including place names and songs such as the Huangpu River, which, along with traditional songs popularized on the Shanghai Bund, create a vivid imagery of a homeland. Ultimately, the director consistently underscores memory, ostensibly guiding the performers while genuinely prompting the audience to recall the profound cultural memories embedded within their hearts.

### TWO PLAYS ON THE SAME STAGE

The interjection of characters from *Peach blossom land* into the emotional apex of *Secret love* generated a moment of discord, which briefly dissipated as individuals navigated the performance. This research references a moment in the play's development leading to its climax for analysis. Modern and traditional cultures are interchanged across temporal and spatial dimensions within the same theatrical environment.

Director: " This scene is the key to the whole play!"

Jiang: " There are some moments you never forget ..... "

(Tao and Chunhua sing on stage)

Tao: " I'm coming to *Peach blossom land*! Get out of the way! "

Director: " What are you doing here? This is a love story! " (Stan Lai , 2006).

The simultaneous performance on the same stage exhibits the quintessential traits of meta-drama. This method dismantles the "fourth wall" of drama and exemplifies the self-awareness inherent in theatrical performances.



The two performances converge on the same stage, merging theatrical elements with the narrative, showcasing intercultural connection of both modern and traditional cultures, while encapsulating the poignancy of human emotions and the absurdity of existence.

### FINDINGS

The director fosters intercultural dialogues in theatre performances by appropriating, altering, and amalgamating cultural aspects. *Secret love in peach blossom land* fosters the amalgamation of Eastern and Western theatrical traditions, styles, and themes, facilitating a discourse between contemporary realism and traditional symbolism, tragedy and comedy, personal experience and collective mythology. It invites the audience to engage with universal human experiences from a multicultural viewpoint while contemplating the interplay between historical nostalgia and modern artistic innovation.

Furthermore, the play converts the theater into a intercultural space where history, memory, and imagination converge. *Secret love* immerses both the artist and the audience in a domain of transformation and political discourse, enabling profound and sensitive engagement with the performers and their narratives. *Peach blossom land* is a minimalist conceptual environment, potentially a paradise and a democratic observation zone, encapsulating the intrinsic symbolism and abstraction of traditional Chinese theatre.

### CONCLUSION

The intercultural performance of *Secret love in peach blossom land* enables the audience to engage with common themes of memory, love, and loss through theatrical performance. The convergence of intercultural performance with other disciplines in modern Chinese drama merits deeper contemplation, as it enhances historical memory, national identity, and creative aesthetics while safeguarding local culture and ideology. Cultural identity can be examined by a worldwide audience through theatre performance that incorporate the aesthetics, social philosophies, and belief systems of many civilizations.

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Liu Xiaoyu

As a modern Chinese drama scholar, I have written this paper from a morally neutral perspective, without involving economic interests or conflicts of political and social ideologies. The purpose of the analysis of this play is to explore the contribution of intercultural performance in Chinese theatre performance to the development of world drama culture.

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### NOTES

The video observations and character dialogues in this study were all sourced from Bilibili, a video platform in China that is excellent and open to the public, which provides drama lovers with the opportunity to revisit this classic work.

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