

Rebecca Cutino

The Legend of the White Snake is a Chinese folktale that has been dramatized in many ways. For this analysis, we screened the play dramatization. The play was presented in an hour and 30 minutes. I immediately understand that the playwrights and producers have the task of consolidating the legend into a play that informs and entertains the audience. If I were to rate the adaptation (1 meaning no similarity and 10 meaning it was the equivalent), I would give it a 6. I researched the basic story and have concluded there are several differences. First being the beginning. The legend begins with an Immortal becoming a vendor at the West Lake Bridge. Here, he encounters and sells immortality pills to Xu. Xu ingests the pills and doesn't feel well. When he asks the vendor, he laughingly ignores him. Later near the lake is a white snake spirit training Taoism magic. The pill causes her to obtain 500 years of spiritual, immortal power. Because this happened as she encountered Xu, they are now intertwined. Another snake spirit, green, encounters the white snake. The white snake turns into a woman, buys the green snake from a beggar, and the two become "sisters". Time goes on and the two women (Bai and Xiaoqing) meet Xu at the Qingming Festival. He does a kind act for Bai and they eventually fall in love. They move to another village and open a medicine store.

The next phase of the legend is where the play begins. That entire beginning was not included in the play. I can't say if that helps or hurts. In the first 20 minutes of the play, we encounter Bai and her sister. They are talking about how beautiful the bridge is and traveling to another city for the festival. Here is where they encounter Xu. The umbrella exchange is the same and this is how they become acquainted. When Xu and the boater discuss what Bai's name is, you can tell he was familiar with her. Perhaps this is a nod to the legend (they encountered each other in another time and immortal realm). In the play, they met as strangers, and time fast-

forwarded to them being married; they also worked at their medicine store. I did feel the first 20 minutes moved slowly. However, I didn't lose much without seeing the beginning of the legend. I would even argue that if it was incorporated, it would've made the play's open drag more.

The next modification was within the introduction of the tortoise spirit (Fahai, the wise Abbott/monk). In the legend, he appears in the beginning in the form of the beggar who fought Bai over the green snake and the one who sells Xu the pill. He re-enters the play at their medicine store. He comes to warn Xu that his wife is an evil snake spirit who's plotting to kill him. Xu in shock is instructed by Fahai to give Bai wine at the Duanwu Festival. At this festival, Xu can get a resistant Bai to drink while. Sidebar, in the legend, mentions Bai pregnant at a later time. Bai drinks the wine and becomes a large white snake. Xu sees his wife in this form and unexpectedly dies. Bai mourns his death and travels to Mount Emei to retrieve a herb that will bring him back to life. This is another part where the legend and play differ. Bai and her sister fight off guardians at the mountain over the herb, something that's not emphasized in the legend. The women ultimately get to keep the herb. In both the legend and play, we see Fahai appear to Xu; he was brought back to life. He still loves and admires Bai. An angry Fahai holds Xu captive. Bai and her sister find out and fight to get Xu back. Fahai calls warriors and dragons faced men to fight Bai. She summons a great flood. The legend says this flood wiped out the village; the play doesn't show this. Here is when we find out she is pregnant so her powers are limited.

The ending is what is incredibly different. The legend says that after the flood, Bai fails in retrieving Xu. He, however, escapes the Temple and reunites with Bai. She gives birth to their son. Fahai reappears, finally defeating Bai and throwing her in jail. Her sister, Xiaoqing promises to avenge her. Twenty years after these events, Xu is a scholar. He travels to his home village,

while Xiaqing was working on her powers to confront Fahai. She does so and defeats him. Bai is freed from the temple and meets her son and husband. Fahai turns into an orange-colored crab and the story ends. Xu is brought back to life and encounters Fahai. He warns him again that Bai will kill him; the only way to avoid this is by converting to Buddhism. He travels to a temple and reluctantly converts to Buddhism. Bai and her sister find out and then go to get him back. This is when the battle with water and warriors happens. It's a long battle scene that ends in Bai's defeat. Spirits of faith defeat and cast the snake spirit away. Xu remains with Fahai and doesn't reunite with Bai; she lets off a scream and the scene abruptly ends. Another small modification was in the religions in both the folklore and the play. In the folklore the religion they are all practicing is Taoism. The play mentions Xu needed to convert to Buddhism to be free of Bai's charm.

Again, the legend and the play have great differences, but the heart of the story remained the same. Xu and Bai were strangers, had an encounter, fell in love, and the truth of who she was came to light. All of the minor plotline changes did not impede on how the story unfolded. I would argue that the play, as seen in the screening, was perfectly fine the way it was. If all of these details were added, the play would've been over an hour and 30 minutes. As a viewer or audience member, if this play was any longer I don't think it would've been as enjoyable. The same can be said for the content. What was thematically presented was just enough for me to consume. Even though it was a slow beginning, I was able to comprehend all which was provided by the subtitles/dialogue. This play was a great representation of Chinese drama and folklore. It was true to similar depictions I've seen; I was simply surprised by how many details were different. That opened my eyes to looking at different moments and outcomes of the play.

The first strength of this production was the overall mise-en-scene. As we know this is so incredibly important for any drama. Specifically, I feel it's pertinent to foreign dramas. I'm a western viewer so I don't have much to hold on to. Dramas like this are more of a visual experience than a thematic one. The actor's body movement and gestures all express emotions that I don't hear through dialogue. It also relays what specific action is happening. There were 2 great examples of mise-en-scene. First, the boat scene towards the beginning of the play. All four characters (Xu, the old boat driver, Bai, and her sister) used their bodies to show getting on board and being on rough water. There was no physical boat or water; their bodies narrated this for the audience. The second great movement was in the flood/water battle scene. This was exceptionally creative. I don't know when this was released; this would dictate their technological capabilities to project any visuals of water etc. They used a collective of actors dressed in blue garments with blue flags to represent water. They flowed all across and around the stage to represent an actual flood. I'm sure seeing this in person was very majestic. The second strength of the production were the costumes. Each character had tailored and detailed pieces that separated them from each other. For example and most importantly, Bai's all-white attire symbolized her beauty and metaphor for her being the "white snake". Xu had simply colored costumes. This was consistent with his role as the average citizen. Fahai's costume was also poignant. I could immediately distinguish he was an older, wise figure in the story. Costumes were a great strength because they were a great representation of the Chinese culture. I would also add the makeup that helped this representation. It was particularly interesting to see male characters wear elaborate makeup; this is normal in Asian culture/dramas. Other strengths worth mentioning were the use of sound and music. Every sound was intentional and clarified

who/what was happening. Ex. Whenever Bai had a dramatic moment, it was often accompanied by a recurring song.

The first weakness of this production was its scene transitions. The opening sequence felt like a cinematographic transition. When it came back to the live shot, I was surprised to see they were so different. I think they could've done more for with the live transitions. I would assume that the film like transitions between acts was for the viewers online. However, those in the audience only saw the bland and nonchalant transitions. I also couldn't tell how many acts there were. This made it difficult to keep track of the story was progressing. I gathered that those film transitions signified when acts started and finished. The second and final weakness was in the overall set design. This is for several reasons. For the sake of the assignment, I knew everything took place in China. Nevertheless, the characters spoke of many different locations. For example, they mentioned the West Lake, the Broken Bridge, a few towns, a temple, the medicine store, and more. There were very basic props and sets that alluded to any of these locations. Everything felt merged. An example of this is in the scene where Xu tries to get Bai to drink wine. The scene prior was supposed to be their medicine store. In the same setting, we see them at the festival. Lastly, after Bai drinks the wine, she goes to their bedroom (behind the curtain). This was also in the same vicinity. I understand there are limitations to the theater. However, having 3 different locations in one place with no design to distinguish is confusing. Another weakness worth mentioning was the lack of lighting design. The lights were stagnant for most of this play. Any visual sensation or allure came more from costumes and makeup.

In regards to subtitles, I think of their impact in a 50/50 way. They were helpful, but it was challenging to divide my attention between that and the events on stage. This is a compromise I can live with because I fully understood what was going on (content-wise). As an

online viewer, I was also able to pause and start over when necessary. The live audience had other advantages. They were mostly native speakers; they didn't need subtitles. However, they weren't able to stop and start. If I was in the audience, it would have been a different, undesirable experience. With no subtitles, I would have had to come up with my conclusions about the content of the play.

Tradition, Innovation, and Politics: Chinese and Overseas Chinese Theatre Across the World is a panel discussion culminated from the 1980s to 1990s. Eleven writers, ranging from playwrights and directors, discuss how Chinese theatre has evolved aesthetically and dramatically. The main concern is how effective spoken and sung dramas are in Chinese. Since there is a blend of history and contemporary themes, the writers discuss which presentation suits a certain theme. Everything they discuss is regarding Chinese dramas from the 1940s to the 1990s. Since the play we watched was a sung drama, I want to highlight the analysis that focuses on that presentation. The first journal is titled "Scenes with Contemporary Silk" written by Fan Yisong. Yisong is a director and associate professor of acting at the Shanghai Theatre Academy. His piece deals with several themes with a focus on the emotional appeals of Chinese operas. He feels that staging, sets, movement, and other categories should be very simplistic. This creates room for actors to emote more freely and dramatically. When talking about a play from his past, he said, "The external world is represented in the actor's body, hands, eyes, and voice, realized in the audience's imagination engendered by the acting." (Fan Yisong, pg. 32). This is true for our screening and even offers more context into the set design. Yisong also mentioned indoor scenes are extremely simplified; actors have to use their skills to create the location, while audience members have to use their imagination to piece everything together. He also mentions certain aesthetic choices are made in conjunction with symbolism. In another play, silk represents many

things. Yisong explains, “ The silk used in traditional Chinese weddings is a symbol for happiness binding the couple together. In our production, in lieu of all the other things we excluded, the silk became an extremely long centerpiece on the stage.” (Fan Yisong, pg. 32) There were many symbols in our screening. The red curtain symbolized suspense and danger (Bai became a snake behind it). The umbrella symbolized Bai and Xu’s stranger to romantic relationships. There are several more.

The next journal is titled “Specifying the Universal” written by Stan Lai. Lai wears several hats: playwright, director, filmmaker, artistic director, and more. He like Yisong covers a lot, but Lai’s opinion on improvisation is what interested me. He doesn’t stress “actor training”. Instead, he lets the actors improvise during their rehearsals. Lai says of improvisation, “I believe that true emotions are channeled in a meaningful way during improvisations only if characters and situations are clearly defined and limitations set.” (Stan Lai, pg. 36) I should also mention he is referring to Chinese traditional opera. Because improvisation is oddly rehearsed, I have no way of telling if it was used in our screening. I can attest that most of the characters exhibited over the top and candid emotions. Xu was very goofy but kind. Bai was very prim and proper; she was also very charming. How they showed was through line delivery and body language. Lai also mentioned how politics influenced art. He says, “ Political events always affect the way we work as well as with what we work. In many ways, I feel that in a given society, political events are often the gross-externalized manifestation of issues that have been internalized on an individual level. In Taiwan, the "independence movement" hasn't affected the way we work as much as the inner forces that this movement expresses.” (Stan Lai, pg. 37) The Tale of the White Snake, according to Wikipedia, is an ancient Chinese legend. There is no mention of any political themes within the play, but existing modifications and adaptations have the opportunity

to make changes based on the political period they are in. I think the blend of folklore and history (in Chinese culture) can be its political statement.

The next journal article is incredibly pertinent. It's about the process of folklore becoming a literature drama. The subject matter of the journal is our screening; I was lucky enough to find it. Whalen Lai from the University of California is the writer of *From Folklore to Literature Theater: Unpacking Madame White Snake*. Specifically, Lai draws attention to the story's origins and how it can effectively be made into a stage production. He also gives context to the man-demon romance theme in the story. First, he explains that Madame White Snake is China's most well-known stories; it's described as a scary ghost story. China is often known to discuss more mature, darker themes through folklore and drama. Hence we have Madame White Snake. Lai offers a very baseline skeleton of the story. He says, "A young man encountered a beautiful maiden attended by a maid during a festive outing near a lake. He followed her and was invited to her fine mansion outside the city, where he dined and stayed overnight. After that one-night stand, the young man became visibly emasculated, his vital essence being slowly drained. The suspicion that he had been bewitched was confirmed by a revisit to the mansion—in reality, a graveyard. A Taoist was called in to perform an exorcism, and, sure enough, a white snake and an otter were driven out." (*Unpacking Madame White Snake* pg. 53) The screening that we watched was a much softer and lighter ambassador in its overall presentation. Fahai refers to Bai as a snake spirit versus a demon. The chain of events is also slightly different. Lastly, there was no exorcism. Xu was instructed to simply convert to Buddhism so Bai wouldn't kill him in the future. The original fable is very explicit in their depiction of Bai and Xu's relationship. This is all worth mentioning because it shows the modifications made when a story is adapted for the stage.

Lai points out metaphysics within Chinese folklore. Bai's character can be broken down into several identities. The folklore presents her as a female, demonic immortal being. To lure a man (Xu), she becomes a charming woman. The play presents her as a female who is disguised as an evil spirit. In both presentations, Bai is a powerful immortal being. Lai says, "In sleep, when drunk, or during exorcism, animal spirits may revert to their subhuman form." (Unpacking Madame White Snake pg. 60) Bai, in the play, is a woman the entire time. We never see the transformation between her and the actual snake. This could be done for several reasons. Costumes, props, or built figures could've achieved this in more modern production. Nonetheless, the idea that she is a multiple spirited being is very mystic. Further, Lai presents this transformation as malevolent to benevolent. He feels we see this specifically in Bai's motherhood. We lose this a little bit in the production, but the idea in the folklore is that when Bai becomes pregnant we see a sense of humanity. All of this is a part of her lure as a spirit though. Overall, Bai's metamorphosis in both presentations is a major ambassador of Chinese history and tradition; it also attests to Buddhist and Taoist beliefs in good and evil.

To conclude thematically, I believe this play had a lot of strengths. I've researched the facets of Chinese traditional theater and Chinese folklore. I believe that because this was a sung drama, it was entertaining and engaging. If it were solely spoken I believe I would have struggled to capture the subtitles and delivery from the actors. I also probably would've missed the plot and themes. While the folklore is a bit darker, I think the separation between folklore and drama was necessary for this play to work. I don't think the producers and directors wanted it to be so serious. Any heavier, the entire production would've needed to be different. A lot of the comical or lighthearted moments would not have worked under a heavier mood. I don't think there is anything wrong with the producers doing this. A part of their job is distinguishing what

works for a modern audience. They often have the leeway to make artistic changes, which is exactly what was done.

To conclude regarding production, I again believe there were several strengths and weaknesses. However, after reading the first two journals I have a different opinion. This wasn't an elaborate production. Costumes and makeup carried the visual aspect of the show. Lights weren't relied on to deliver any emotions or cues. Audio (music, sounds, instruments) were used to accentuate the delivery of the actors. The set left more to be desired. The real strength of the production comes from the actor's skills and the director's staging of everything. Again, I don't know if there was any improvisation. If there was I would assume it's what produced the actor's elaborate and lighthearted delivery. I understood each of their perspectives and sentiments. I would argue that if there was any change in lighting or technology, this may have distracted the audience from what was happening. I know as an online viewer, my eyes can only handle so much.

To conclude regarding subtitles and online viewership, I was satisfied with the experience. This specific screening came with subtitles, and I'm incredibly grateful. The subtitles were a useful addition to the production as it stood. I was able to read along and put the plot together this way. I also feel if there were no subtitles I would've used my imagination and come up with a unique interpretation. This doesn't always work. A big example is a conversation between Fahai and Xu. I was wondering where the play was going and started to lose interest. I gained interest back when I saw what Fahai revealed to Xu (Bai is an evil spirit). Subtitles afforded this. I'm assuming that the audience was native speakers. However, by adding subtitles, the producers have a great opportunity to spread this play to wider audiences. This was a smooth

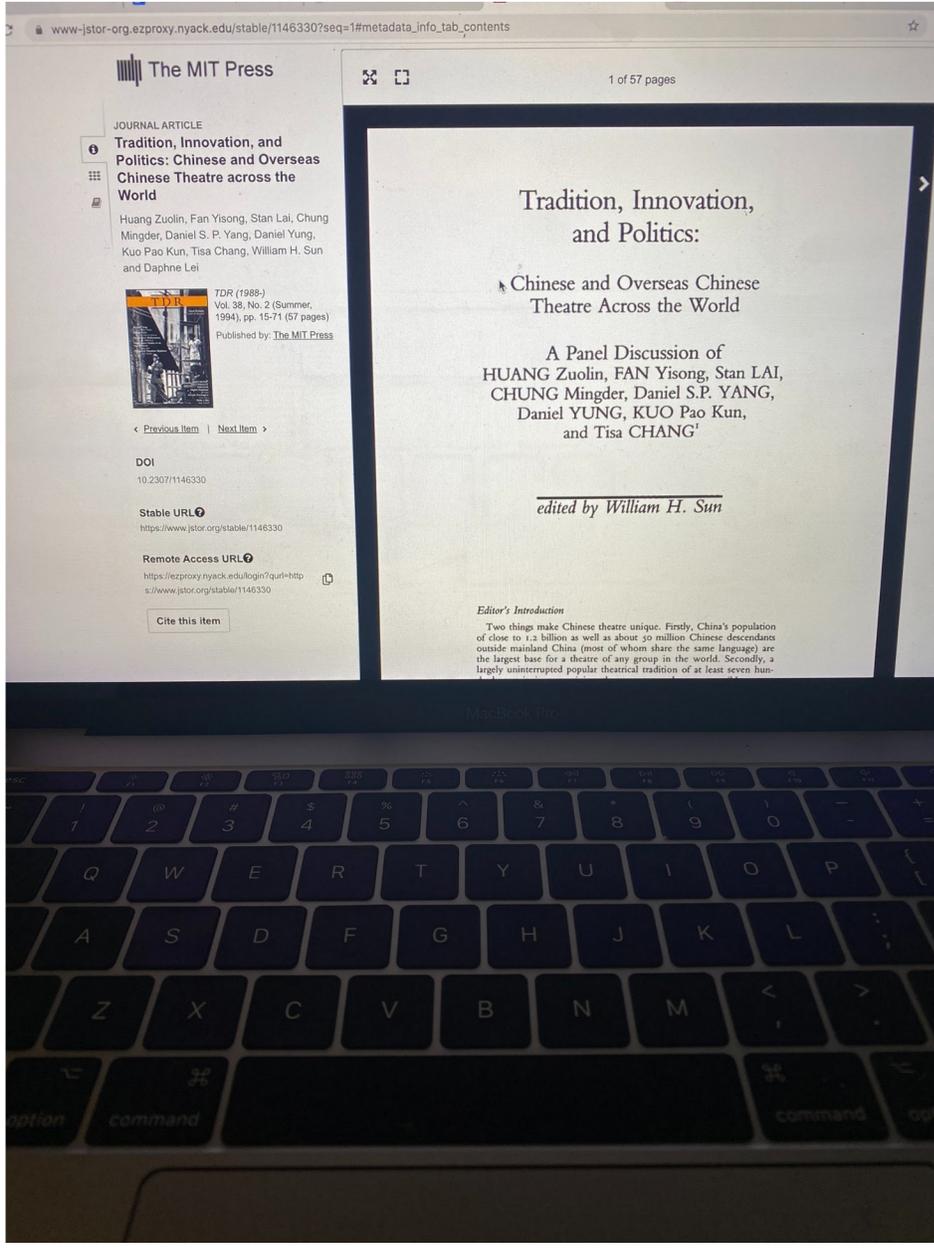
hour and 30-minute video production. If there was a moment I struggled with something - I simply paused and started over. For the sake of this assignment, this is another major benefit.

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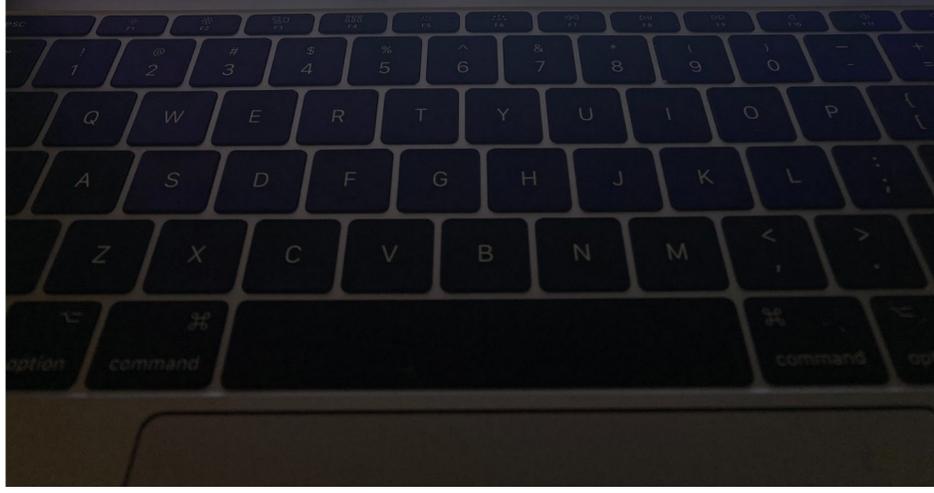
Chinese and Overseas Chinese Theatre Across the World

A Panel Discussion of
HUANG Zuolin, FAN Yisong, Stan LAI,
CHUNG Mingder, Daniel S.P. YANG,
Daniel YUNG, KUO Pao Kun,
and Tisa CHANG'

edited by William H. Sun

Editor's Introduction

Two things make Chinese theatre unique. Firstly, China's population of close to 1.2 billion as well as about 50 million Chinese descendants outside mainland China (most of whom share the same language) are the largest base for a theatre of any group in the world. Secondly, a largely uninterrupted popular theatrical tradition of at least seven hun-





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WHALEN LAI
University of California, Davis

From Folklore to Literate Theater: Unpacking *Madame White Snake*

Abstract

The story of *Madame White Snake* began as a tale of demonic seduction that occurred by a lake. But it can be traced back to myths of man-god romances in the *Songs of the South* and to cults of yearly human sacrifice to He Bo, the river god. These evolved, in time, into two distinct genres of "encounter with female immortals" and "run-in with demons." Medieval Buddhism further polarized them: As mountains became the home of ascetics, the lakes, which used to be the abode of nymphs, became the lair of she-demons. *Madame White Snake* was originally one such succubus, but she took on the virtues of the female immortal—as a good wife and mother. This Janus of a figure gives the story a new depth. The essay unpacks the symbols as well as the structural dynamics of this evolving tale.

Key words: White Snake — demons — sexual attitudes — man-god romance — female immortals