

From West End to Malvern Festival: The Creation, Dissemination and Acceptance of *Lady Precious Stream* in Britain in 1930s

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Hsiung Shih-I's *Lady Precious Stream* has won the favor of the British theatre market since its release. Since hitting the stage of the West End theaters of London, it has not only achieved great success at the box office, but also attracted the attention of the British theatre elite. From the journal's comments, reports, and archives in the 1930s, with the "Chinese theatre convention" and "British theatre performance" dual cultural context identity, since *Lady Precious Stream* performed in public, it got the British theater's attention and absorption quickly, and gradually became part of the self-innovation in the British theatre movement. The reasons are not only the obsession and enthusiasm of the British society and the theatre audience with the concept of "China", but also the recognition and admiration of the traditional Chinese theatrical techniques by the British theatre elite, and the profound influence of the international situation on the theatre culture of the two countries. This research from the perspective of archives, by the bear in the creation of *Lady Precious Stream* background analysis, and the review in the British theatrical performance and evaluation, explain in early 20th century, how the concept of British "Chinese Theatre" is known by the British theatre, use and spread to the people, and the resulting of transformation image in Chinese theatre.

Keywords: *Lady Precious Stream*, Hsiung Shih-I, Chinese theatre image

On November 27, 1934, Hsiung Shih-I's *Lady Precious Stream* premiered at the Little Theatre in London, produced by Nancy Price of the National People Theatre, and became key and highlight play in Little Theatre's pre-Christmas entertainment season. Hsiung Shih-I mentioned in the script of *Lady Precious Stream* that, the love story between Precious Stream and Hsieh Ping-Kuei is well known so much in China, that "no cultivated Chinese would regard *Lady Precious Stream* as being worthy of the name of literature" (Advertisement, 1934, p. 10), but it rekindled the curiosity of British theatergoers about China, even more than the royal wedding of Prince George, Duke of Kent (Charques, 1934, p. 7). *Lady Precious Stream* was then performed in London for three years. Though influenced by the "*La Chinoiserie*", so called "Chinese Theatre" are very common in the British theater market, and most of their contents are similar, and they nearly all claim themselves to adopt from the Chinese story. Also, few Chinese Theatre even claimed to adopt "Chinese theatre convention". However, *Lady Precious Stream* is very unique among these works, especially in terms of its acceptance by the British society, which not only achieves a great success at the box office, but also gains the favor of the British theatrical

elites; it had been participating in the International Chinese Exhibition of Art as a symbol of China, which organized by the Royal Academy in 1935, and also being honored by Barry Jackson to take part in the Malvern Festival. In the following 30 years, *Lady Precious Stream* repeatedly rehearsed by the British theater, troupe. Under the influence of various factors, *Lady Precious Stream* has become a representative of British “Chinese theatre” and has spread continuously, directly or indirectly promoting the construction and remodeling of the image of Chinese theatre overseas.

This study, through a renewed analysis and exploration of historical materials, reveals multiple reasons behind the success and popularity of Hsiung Shih-I’s *Lady Precious Stream* in Britain. Firstly, as a Chinese theatre, it brought a fresh atmosphere to the British theater scene, encouraging the British theater industry to reflect on and evolve its own practices. Secondly, newly discovered historical documents and archives show that British theater elites, represented by Barry Jackson, provided substantial support for the creation and performance of *Lady Precious Stream*, making it a part of the transformative landscape of British theater. Finally, through his efforts in creating and promoting *Lady Precious Stream*, Hsiung Shih-I demonstrated the cultural aspirations of Chinese intellectuals abroad. By presenting and disseminating Chinese theater, he aimed to reshape its image, countering the hostility and denigration it had faced in British society since the mid-19th century, and to secure British support for China’s cultural renaissance, as well as for potential political and diplomatic advocacy.

Literature Review

As a representative figure in the cross-cultural practice of modern Chinese theatre history, Hsiung Shih-I and his English play *Lady Precious Stream* have gradually garnered academic attention in recent years. Existing research primarily focuses on the following aspects:

Firstly, scholarly focus centres on Hsiung’s strategies of cross-cultural adaptation and translation practice. There is a general consensus that the success of *Lady Precious Stream* lies in its adept deployment of “performability” strategies. Compared to his less successful translation of *The Romance of the Western Chamber*, Hsiung adopted a more flexible domesticating strategy in *Lady Precious Stream*. This involved transforming arias into spoken dialogue, simplifying the plot structure, infusing British humour, and reshaping female characters to align with contemporary Western feminist sentiments. These adjustments ensured the play’s accessibility to English-speaking audiences and practitioners at linguistic, cultural, and practical performance levels.

Secondly, scholars have situated *Lady Precious Stream* within its historical and cultural context of production and reception. Thorpe (2019), employing a practice-as-research methodology by restaging the play, delves into the intercultural stage aesthetics of its original production. His research reveals that the 1934 London performance engaged in a hybrid practice, situated between Chinese theatrical conventions and Western representational theatre. This was evident in stage movement property usage, and costuming (initially eclectic, later assisted by Mei Lanfang). This practice simultaneously catered to Western expectations of “Chinoiserie” while subtly challenging the Orientalist gaze. Harbeck (1996), comparing *Lady Precious Stream* with the earlier *The Yellow Jacket*, argues that both plays, through their “quaint” staging techniques, successfully rediscovered for Western audiences the pleasures of theatrical artifice, albeit filtered through contemporary Western preconceptions of Chinese culture.

Furthermore, a postcolonial and identity politics lens provides a critical dimension for interpreting the play. Research by Diana Yeh (2015, cited in Liu & Liu; Thorpe) uncovers the darker side of the play’s success,

suggesting it partly complied with and reinforced Western “Chinoiserie” aesthetics and the colonial order. The use of “yellowface” performance, where Chinese roles were played by white actors, effectively “excised” actual Chinese presence from the stage. However, Thorpe (2019) offers a more nuanced view, arguing that Hsiung’s physical presence on stage as the “Honorable Reader” during the London run ruptured the illusory authenticity created by yellowface. This presence covertly questioned Western representational authority and asserted Chinese modernity.

Despite significant progress, several shortcomings remain in the existing research. Firstly, discussions on “performability” still lean towards text and translation strategies. There is a lack of in-depth, focused studies on the specific mechanisms and aesthetic effects of non-textual elements—such as music, physical movement, and stage space—within the cross-cultural adaptation process. While Thorpe’s practice-as-research initiates this direction, further theoretical synthesis is needed. Secondly, research on the production networks, agent systems, and publishing mechanisms surrounding the play remains fragmented. Although studies mention figures like Nancy Price and Mei Lanfang, a comprehensive picture of how various actors collaborated and negotiated within the intercultural theatre production is yet to be fully developed. Thirdly, existing research often concentrates on *Lady Precious Stream* itself or comparisons with *The Romance of the Western Chamber*. There is a lack of systematic comparison placing it within the broader history of global intercultural theatre, alongside contemporaneous endeavours by other non-Western dramatists in Europe and America (e.g., the dissemination of Japanese Noh or Indian theatre in the West), thus limiting a full understanding of its unique historical position.

In summary, future research on *Lady Precious Stream* can build upon the solid foundation of textual and cultural analysis to further explore the embodied dimension of stage practice, the social networks of intercultural production, and the comparative dimension within global theatre history. This will enable a more comprehensive understanding of the work’s complexity as an early 20th-century proactive endeavour of Chinese theatre engaging with the world and its historical significance.

The Transformation of the Definition of “*La Chinoiserie*”: The Evolution of the British Theatre

Since the 18th century, no other artistic style could rival the popularity of *La Chinoiserie* across Europe. Like Xu (2019, p. 266) described that, Europeans began replicating all things Chinese, starting with artifacts, and over time, “China” evolved from a written concept into a cultural symbol. During this trend, British publications, literature, and theater enthusiastically embraced, imitated, and adapted Chinese styles. Furniture, artworks, and literary works seemed only to cater to British tastes for opulence, novelty, and exoticism if they bore Chinese characteristics. In this context, *The Connoisseur* satirically remarked, “Chinese aesthetics have taken over our gardens, buildings, and furniture, and they might even invade our churches; wouldn’t it be grand if even a monument bore Chinese features, adorned with dragons, bells, pagodas, and a Mandarin?” (Buckre Pos, 2004, p. 167)

By the mid-19th century, Chinese theater or Chinese opera on the British stage could be understood in three main forms. The first includes plays or operas such as *The Bronze House* (1835) and *Ching-Chow-Hi* (1853), which featured exaggerated portrayals of China or used satire to cast China and the Chinese people in a negative light. These depictions were neither authentic nor realistic but rather an imagined and curated version of Chinese elements, aimed at attracting audiences. The second type involved adaptations of traditional Chinese theater stories, such as Arthur Murphy’s reinterpretation of Voltaire’s *The Orphan of China* (1759), James Laver’s

translation of German author Alfred Henschke's *The Circle of Chalk* (1929), and Pax Roberson's adaptation of the Yuan play *Laou-Seng-Urh* (or "An Heir in His Old Age") into *Lew Yuen Wae* (1923). These works aimed to extol Chinese society, culture, and moral qualities, serving as a reminder to a Europe amidst social change of the importance of a stable social order, as Voltaire observed:

Only the ancient nations of China, Greece, and Rome understood the true spirit of society. In fact, nothing could better foster companionship, soften customs, and enhance reason than bringing people together in the enjoyment of intellectual pleasures. Those few countries that rejected theater over the past century failed to enter the ranks of civilized nations. (Luo, 2014, p. 167)

The final type is represented by *The Yellow Jacket* (1913), created by American actor J. Harry Benrimo and playwright George Cochrane Hazelton. Although its narrative resembled earlier European Chinoiserie works, blending exaggerated and pieced-together elements, the play incorporated Chinese theatrical conventions such as stylization and symbolic gestures, aiming to break away from the longstanding dominance of realism in European theater. Before *Lady Precious Stream*, these types of Chinese theater in Europe largely involved playwrights borrowing the symbolic concept of "China" to explore social or theatrical themes. During the mid-to late-19th century, British Chinese theater often revolved around adventurous, imaginative portrayals of China. As Ross Forman noted, Chinese theater became so formulaic that similarly themed plays were often staged simultaneously under different names. These plays frequently explored themes of freedom, love, and filial duty:

Stories of stolen jewels or family heirlooms, usually taken by an ordinary person from a grand religious icon; or peculiar tales inspired by Chinese law, especially those concerning marriage...An elderly father (often a Mandarin) arranges for his daughter to marry an old, unsuitable man instead of the young man she loves. (Forman, 2013, p. 167)

Lady Precious Stream: Hsiung Shih-I's Adaptation of Chinese Story and Its Reception in British Theater

In the 1920s, Hsiung Shih-I already changed his play-writing interest to focus on British theater, particularly admiring the works of the Scottish playwright James Barrie. During that time, Hsiung Shih-I translated Barrie's *The Admirable Crichton* into Chinese, publishing with four installments in the Chinese theatre journal *The Fiction Monthly*. He once stated that "anyone who reads Barrie's work will surely be convinced" (Zheng, 2022, p. 49). Following this, he published more than 10 of Barrie's plays, including *Half an Hour*, *Seven Women*, and *The Will*. During the translation process, Hsiung Shih-I not only learned about Barrie's theatrical spirit but also internalized by Barrie's writing techniques. His first English one-act play, *The Money God*, bore a prominent dedication on the title page: To J.M.B. (To James Matthew Barrie). Barrie's stories were accessible, humorous, and often emphasized satire, with extensive descriptive text to introduce scenes and characters. This style would significantly influence Hsiung Shih-I's later theatrical approach. In *Lady Precious Stream*, the property man does not simply imitate a traditional Chinese theater role but instead resembles Barrie's storytelling devices. Also, as a playwright writing in his second language, Hsiung Shih-I English did not resemble that of native speakers, as observed in George Bernard Shaw's comment on *The Money God*: "We ought to label your English as 'Chinese English,' much like we say Chinese white or Chinese silver" (Zheng, 2022, p. 70).

Hsiung Shih-I's Creative Approach in *Lady Precious Stream*

By examining Hsiung Shih-I's creative experience and the script of *Lady Precious Stream*, it is clear that while he incorporated techniques from Chinese opera in both plot and performance, he employed two distinct

strategies in the writing process to differentiate it from other “Chinese dramas” on the British stage and try to achieve commercial success by these characters. Before creating *Lady Precious Stream*, with the help of Sir James Stewart Lockhart, Hsiung Shih-I conducted extensive research on Chinese theater materials, and dedicated substantial time to studying *The Circle of Chalk*, a play adapted from a Yuan opera that was staged in London in 1929 but had limited success in both art and commercial. Hsiung Shih-I attributed this failure to translation issues and observed that mere “artistic value” was insufficient to captivate audiences. Interaction with the audience was necessary for commercial success, as emphasized by Lascelles Abercrombie’s description of *Lady Precious Stream* as “a thoroughly commercial theater” (Hsiung, 1934, p. ix). Thus, Hsiung Shih-I employed British theatrical techniques, making significant edits and additions to the story template of the Chinese traditional theatre *Fierce Tiger With Red Mane*, especially scenes like *Lady Precious Stream* choosing her husband with an embroidered ball and Hsieh Ping-Kuei’s marriage with the Princess of Western Regions with British moral standards and audience preferences. As Hsiung Shih-I himself stated, this play was built upon “borrowing outlines” and “greatly modifying them” (Hsiung, 2010, p. 30).

Hsiung Shih-I’s creation of *Lady Precious Stream* not only responded to the British theater’s intense interest in “China” but also used elements of traditional Chinese storytelling and theatrical conventions, integrating techniques that were popular in 1930s British theater along with his “Chinese English”. This combination of elements established a new form of Chinese theater. Much like Shaw’s description of “Chinese English”, British theatrical language and staging lent audiences a sense of familiarity, while the Chinese story and presentation brought a unique novelty, creating a highly distinctive viewing experience that allowed audiences to feel they were witnessing authentic “China” in London’s West End theatre.

The Malvern Festival: The British Elite’s Embrace of Lady Precious Stream

Before *Lady Precious Stream*, the play *The Yellow Jacket*, which also used simplified staging, virtual stage and stylized performance, had been staged in London. However, despite both plays being based on so-called “Chinese stories”, *The Yellow Jacket* failed to evoke the same level of enthusiasm among British audiences. Unlike 1930s America, Britain had never displayed a strong nationwide interest in Chinese traditional theatrical arts. When confronted with a “Chinese play” written by a Chinese author, most British journalists and critics interpreted *Lady Precious Stream* as a “traditional Chinese play” (Grein, 1934, p. 1066), given their own cultural limitations. As with *The Yellow Jacket*, reviews for *Lady Precious Stream* focused on its adherence to “Chinese theatrical tradition”, specifically praising its stylization, symbolic elements, and the property man role. *Punch* noted, “Nothing could be more theatrical...It is a pleasure to the playgoer to be credited with so much imagination” (A.D., 1943, p. 58). However, Hsiung Shih-I never described *Lady Precious Stream* as a direct translation of traditional Chinese theater. Like British poet and critic Lascelles Abercrombie stated in the foreword of *Lady Precious Stream* was “not properly a translation of a play, but a rendering of Mr. Hsiung’s conflation of several versions of a famous dramatic theme” (Hsiung, 1934, p. 1x). Throughout the foreword and in various interviews, Hsiung Shih-I avoided the term “translation”, instead calling it “a typical play exactly as produced on a Chinese stage” (Hsiung, 1934, p. xvii).

In contrast to *The Yellow Jacket*, *Lady Precious Stream* offered a solution to British theater’s shift towards stylized and simplified staging. By the late 19th century, elaborate scenery, refined costumes, and complex performance styles had become the norm in British theater, driving up production costs that commercial theaters struggled to meet and amateur groups could not afford. British critics saw this trend as a loss of theatrical

creativity. *Lady Precious Stream*'s simplified sets, symbolic performance, and stylized gestures provided British audiences with a unique aesthetic experience, unconsciously addressing some of the very issues within British theater. Like *The Bystander* stated:

From the Chinese managerial viewpoint, this convention must be an economical godsend...In the East, the cost is nil, thanks to the fact that the audience is asked to imagine all the lovely scenery which the management had failed to provide. (Rouson, 1934, p. 496)

In December 1946, under the direction of Mathew Forsyth of the Glasgow Citizen's Theatre, *Lady Precious Stream* was set to be staged at the Glasgow Princess's Theatre. Hsiung Shih-I accepted an invitation from the theater's chairman, James Bridie, and director Mathew Forsyth to write notes for the program in the playbill. In the note, Hsiung Shih-I detailed how *Lady Precious Stream* began as a suggestion from his doctoral supervisor, Allardyce Nicoll, and ultimately benefitted from the support of British theater figures, including Lascelles Abercrombie and James Bridie. Hsiung Shih-I's note reflect how he was introduced to and became integrated into the British theater elite, a connection further indicated by his mention of the Malvern Festival and the support from the playwright Barry Jackson, suggesting that, following the public performances of *Lady Precious Stream*, it had been embraced and linguistically transformed into "Chinese theater" for British audiences.

The Malvern Festival, considered the beginning of the new British theater movement, was founded by Barry Jackson in collaboration with the theater manager Roy Limbert. Later, they partnered with the renowned playwright George Bernard Shaw on various productions. Jackson aimed to use the Malvern Festival to spark a movement against commercial theater, challenging the star-centered and long-running productions that had come to dominate British theater. Jackson believed theater should emphasize moral, educational, and spiritual enlightenment (Ananisarab, 2021, pp. 279-280). After completing *Lady Precious Stream*, Hsiung Shih-I, through Nicoll's introduction, submitted his manuscript to Jackson, with whom he discussed the play's creation at the 1934 summer festival. At that time, the Malvern Festival was undergoing a transition. Jackson hoped that a series of productions under a "Modernist Project" would counter the commercialization of London's West End, while Shaw advocated for a purified theatrical experience that could "attract international urban elites" and achieve a quasi-religious spiritual engagement (Bratton, 2003, p. 68). Limbert, however, saw the West End as the festival's ultimate goal, viewing it as "a showcase with at least one play suitable for the West End" (Conolly, 2002, p. 187). In August 1, 1936, *Lady Precious Stream* was on the stage, under the invitation to the Malvern Festival indicated its box office appeal, and received the endorsement of both Jackson and Shaw, establishing it as a milestone in British theatrical art, with its simplified staging, symbolic performance, and the moral messages embedded in the script pointing toward a possible direction for British theater development. As noted by a special correspondent of *The Times*, *Lady Precious Stream* attracted a broad range of theater enthusiasts:

Those who are temperamentally apt to be dissolved into ecstasies by what is primitive in art, those who are fond of a fairy tale, and those whose curiosity is piqued by an unfamiliar method of story-telling find themselves competing for seats with cheerful crowds who delight in the charming and the grateful, whether it be traditional or novel, sophisticated or primitive. (Malvern Festival, 1936, p. 8)

Thus, *Lady Precious Stream* ultimately became a British adaptation of Chinese theatrical traditions, serving as a mirror for British audiences to reflect upon and embrace the "Other" as part of themselves. Unlike *The Yellow Jacket*, *Lady Precious Stream* was not a local creation but rather a Chinese playwright's intentional alignment with British theatrical values, making it a "Chinese play" tailored for British theatergoers. As Erika Fischer-

Lichte (He, 2010) observed, this contact was not intended for cross-cultural exchange or to familiarize audiences with foreign theatrical traditions but rather adapted “Otherness” to meet the expectations of the British audience.

From Oldness to Newness: The Construction and Transformation of China’s Theatrical Image Overseas

In November 1927, a special correspondent from *The Times* in Beijing reported on Chinese traditional theater, with a piece titled “The Chinese Theatre, Conventions of a Drama”, offering a thorough portrayal of both urban and rural Chinese traditional theatrical performances. This description infused “traditional” with new significance—Chinese theater’s “old” was seen not only as self-limiting but also as evidence of a failure to “arouse emotions” in cross-cultural exchanges, implying stagnation and insularity. Most importantly, in the continuous staging of “old dramas” across rural and urban China, audiences and actors would collaboratively adapt the storylines to express hostility toward foreigners:

In every play there was a wicked “barbarian,” who wore a hideous mask, and was eventually outwitted by the hero’s scrupulous observance of the precepts of the Chinese sages. This form of play stimulated a widespread hatred of all “barbarians,” or foreigners, which though originally directed against the Mongols and Tartars, has now, in the interior, been turned against the modern “barbarians” from Europe and America. (The Chinese Theatre, 1927, p. 11)

The “barbarian” depicted in the text exhibits clear temporal markers and genealogical connections. Historically, Western drama—especially “Chinese theatre”—has consistently portrayed the Eastern exotic as a realm where wise philosophers and barbaric rulers coexist. Even in the derogatory and satirical portrayals of “Chinese theatre” in the latter half of the 19th century, protagonists could still be seen seeking guidance from sages within Eastern lands. However, when this scenario is transposed to Chinese traditional theatre, the long-standing association with “barbarians” undergoes a contextual shift. When “modern” Europeans and Americans are regarded as “barbarians” by the so-called “barbaric” Chinese, the meaning of Chinese traditional theatre for Chinese audiences becomes more ambiguous, functioning as a deeply embedded expression within the framework of news narratives. Whether it involves Tatars, Mongols, Europeans, or Americans, being labeled “barbarians” serves as a kind of historical retrospection that asserts their own subjectivity, thus shifting the interpretative focus of the text. Here, hostility emanating from the East extends to distant regions, casting Europeans and Americans in this light. The term “outwitted” (often used in Western-created “Chinese theatre” to depict protagonists vanquishing villains with the help of an Eastern sage) takes on an ironic tone when viewed alongside the “widespread hatred” mentioned later in the text; here, it is less a description of theatrical performance than a sardonic lament on contemporary Chinese realities.

Meanwhile in China, the intellectual and artistic circles, discussions began to center on the need to reform traditional theater and to establish “new theater”. Among Chinese scholars and experts, the superiority of Western theater over Chinese theater was not seen solely in artistic terms but rather as a matter rooted in economic, social, and political dimensions. Against this backdrop, efforts to reform traditional Chinese theater aimed to create a new form that could stand on par with Western theatre, or simply intact move the Western theatre directly to China: “In these fortuitous times, should there arise a movement with conscious reform, while it may not produce dramas comparable to those of Ibsen, it would surely yield a Chinese theater of equal value to Western opera” (“Theatre Research: The Natural Revolutionary Trends in Chinese Drama (Continued)”, 1922, p. 3).

At that time, Chinese intellectuals, including Hsiung Shih-I, sought to demonstrate that Chinese theater—particularly traditional forms—had moved beyond the bounds of the “old” by embracing European “new”

theatrical styles. This drive for reform emerged as a response to the unique historical conditions in which these intellectuals strove to shed outdated and backward perceptions, leading many to uncritically adopt Western theatrical forms. In their view, Western “newness” symbolized unquestionable progress, while Eastern “oldness”, though historically rich, signified a regressive image of Chinese society. This shift reflects the intellectual struggle within China to reconcile the values of the “new” and the “old”. From the British perspective, China’s conservatism presented a particular point of interest—its resistance and rejection of Western ideological and cultural systems. Material scarcity and poverty, they believed, could be addressed in time, but culturally, as exhibited in theater, Chinese society remained rooted in the “old”. The perception that “the veneer is Western, the foundation is of the East” (E.H.G., 1925, p. 1302), persisted among many British intellectuals regarding China. To reshape this British view, numerous Chinese intellectuals published perspectives in English-language newspapers and journals, asserting that China had fully mastered the art of harmonizing the “new” and the “old”. This fusion extended beyond the theater stage and represented a broader cultural synthesis.

On February 25, 1928, an article published in *The Illustrated London News* titled “The Modern Chinese Stage”, authored by George Kin Leung, discussed the “new image” of female stage actors in China. The article provided a historical background on the role of “Dan” (female roles in Chinese traditional theatre), while distinguishing the “old” from the “new”. Although the formation of Chinese traditional theatre is a matter of history, modern Chinese theater, Leung argued, had progressed beyond the constraints of the past, reflecting actors’ improving social status and the emergence of a refreshed stage presence. Leung emphasized that this transformation was the result of a “Western spirit” entering the Chinese stage, evident in the appearance of Chinese female performers wearing Western or comic costumes, as well as in the rise of male Dan actors to newfound prominence. This “new” Chinese theater, he contended, was merely a modified form of the old, but one infused with Western influence:

Though the old drama ought to be preserved in its purity, a new school, known as the wen-ming, or vulgate drama, which is entirely spoken and patterned, in a fashion, after European models, should be encouraged. Many foreign plays—notably Ibsen’s—have been translated into Chinese, and an admirable adaptation of *Lady Windermere’s Fan* has been performed with great success by a company of amateurs. (Leung, 1928, p. 308)

Leung’s observations echo the spread of *Lady Precious Stream* in Britain. First, contemporary Chinese theater was no longer a remnant of obsolete customs but rather a cultural reflection of social progress in response to Western influence, marking a departure from the theatrical traditions of the Qing era. Second, the shift in theatrical thought stemmed from the “European model”, as evidenced by the success of numerous Ibsen plays translated and performed in China, along with amateur performances of *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, countering the notion that “Chinese actors could not perform Western plays due to a lack of comprehension of Western spirit” (*Chinese Drama*, 1926, p. 8). In Leung’s narrative, Chinese and Western theater both assumed a new form, but this was predicated on the Chinese society’s wholesale acceptance of Western thought. When celebrated Dan actors like Mei Lanfang, Xun Huisheng, and Cheng Yanqiu continued to be classified as part of the “old drama”, the concept of “new” and “old” in the theatrical lexicon underwent a subtle transformation. What was ancient and outdated became redefined as “purity”. Even as Chinese theater emerged from its localized sociocultural context, transforming into an art form capable of standing alongside Western theater, it remained constrained within a framework shaped by Western ideals.

Thus, the traditional values embedded in *Lady Precious Stream* continued to provide British audiences with

an unusual theatrical experience. On one level, it adhered to longstanding British narratives of “Chinese theatre”, filled with adventure and romance; also the British audiences still felt the “purity” of Chinese traditional theatre. However, in this play, Hsieh Ping-Kuei journeyed not eastward but westward, taking on the role of savior. This also hinted at Chinese intellectuals’ eagerness to alter their theatrical image, actively seeking acceptance within Western theatrical circles. This is especially evident in the dignified, composed, and morally refined image of the Chinese characters in *Lady Precious Stream*, which diverged from conventional British theatrical representations; it expresses the Chinese theatre absorption and adoption to the British theatre without hesitation.

For this traditional Chinese play is of a texture which embraces within itself the whole gamut of plays to which I have referred, from nurseryland to sophisticated maturity—adventure and conquest, fairytale and fact, spectacle and romance. It does it so lightly and delicately that the phantasmagoria is curiously fascinating.

Do not look for elaborate scenic devices and all the mechanical resources of our well-equipped stage. This tale of Precious Stream who wedded a gardener and became an empress evolves itself from imagination. It does not encumber its progress with etceteras, for the Chinese have the wisdom to know that, so long as the illusion is established, nothing else matters. (Grein, 1934, p. 185)

Conclusion

If works like *The Yellow Jacket*, *The Circle of Chalk* represent British theater’s unreflective appropriation of Chinese theatrical conventions, then *Lady Precious Stream* stands out as a unique form of “Chinese theater” shaped by specific political and social conditions. The creation process and subsequent commentary surrounding *Lady Precious Stream* reveal the British public’s enduring imagination and fascination with China, with pastoral imagery becoming a source of solace in the British theatrical landscape of the time. A closer examination, however, indicates that cultural equality in exchange was compromised, with white actors donning “yellow face” in “Chinese theater”. The so-called “Chinese conventions” were ultimately a hybridization of Chinese theatrical tradition and British theatrical presentation. In these performances, theater makers and audiences alike were captivated by the “exotic” staging, discovering the poetic and comedic spirit of “Chinese theater” with each viewing; also, the acting skills on *Lady Precious Stream* also make the audience feel the full acceptance, when they could easily found that the British theatre form in a Chinese traditional theatre, thus gaining greater satisfaction in watching. The production of *Lady Precious Stream* exemplifies European theater’s incremental retreat from tradition. Elements intended to remain invisible, such as the property man, pantomime gestures, symbolic scenery, and stylized actions, constituted the primary appeal of *Lady Precious Stream*, echoing the emphasis in *The Yellow Jacket*. Clearly, “Chinese theater” in this context was nothing more than a mimicry of British theatrical traditions—a Chinese playwright’s reception and adaptation of Orientalism. Under these circumstances, genuine Chinese theater did not make an appearance but became a unique instrument for challenging theatrical norms, contrasting sharply with the realities faced by Chinese people both domestically and abroad.

On January 27, 1936, *Lady Precious Stream* premiered at the Booth Theatre on Broadway. After Mei Lanfang’s visit to the United States in 1930, critics and audiences who had experienced authentic Chinese traditional theater viewed *Lady Precious Stream* as merely a naive interpretation of *The Yellow Jacket*. Following the premiere, American critic Brooks Atkinson, who had once praised Mei Lanfang’s performances, expressed disappointment, sharply criticizing *Lady Precious Stream* as a misrepresentation of Chinese traditional theatrical art:

But if it is not unardonably rude to speak prosaically of a play with such a limpid title, this theatregoer must confess to the shadow of a disappointment in the acting. *The Yellow Jacket* introduced us many years ago to what we regard as the naiveté of Chinese staging. More recently Dr. Mei Lan-Fang gave us a glimpse of the pure art of Chinese acting; and until a few years ago Chinese theatre in the Bowery held magnificent court every evening. Excepting the leading players, the performance of *Lady Precious Stream* is common. Some of the acting is as broad as Gilbert and Sullivan and some as coarse as musical comedy. If at last we are to have in English a genuine Chinese play, may we not expect an exquisite performance that relishes, even though it cannot imitate, the proprieties of Chinese acting? By blunders in the casting, Dr. Hsiung and his advisers have marred a good deal the little conceit they are offering. (Atkinson, 1936, p. 15)

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