

Mobilities, Identities and Diversities: Contemporary Interpretations of a Canonical Chinese Play in Singapore

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Globalization increases mobilities and multiplies identities in Asia. Singapore, a city state with diverse Asian communities, amplifies this trend. In the 1990s, Singapore recruited large numbers of Western educated Chinese scholars, who formed new diasporas across Asia and became catalyst for further cultural diversities. This multifaceted Asian phenomenon can be best exemplified in Chinese scholar-director Grant Shen's contemporary productions of the traditional Chinese opera—*The West Wing* (2008, 2016). This study discusses issues of mobilities, identities, and diversities through *The West Wing*, in which the performers are predominantly from Asian diasporas. The mobility of Grant Shen from China to Singapore via the US diversifies his cultural identity, at once rooted deeply in Chinese culture while openly embracing Western liberalism and Singaporean plurality. His theatre productions, boldly adopting pop music, employing trendy language, and recreating pro-feminist scenes, vividly attest to cultural diversities. Identity issues come to the fore when this well-received play in Singapore toured Shanghai, where it was welcomed by the young but frowned upon by others as subversive to Chinese tradition. This study views the multiplicity of Singapore as a fertile land for productions foretelling the plural future Asia.

Keywords: mobilities, identities, cultural diversities, scholar-director, canonic drama

Globalization brings about increasing mobility, diversities, and plural identities in traditionally homogeneous Asian countries; among which, Singapore appears to lead the trend. As a “settler” country like Australia, Canada, and the US, the dominant population of Singapore, rather than from the Anglo-Saxon origin, belongs to ethnic Chinese (Huat, 2009, p. 239). Officially a “multiracial” nation, Singapore, the city state is populated with diverse ethnic groups of Malays, Chinese, Indians, and Eurasians. Singaporeans are more or less endowed with double identities—one of Singapore and another their ethnic country/origin.

The obvious diversities in Singapore as a nation could be seen in its four racial identities and four official languages. As classified by the government, the four identities refer to Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Others (CMIO) (Tan, 2012, p. 450). In order to maintain racial harmony and align with global competition, Singapore has four official languages—English, Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil, among which Malay is constituted as national language, and English the working language used in formal settings and medium of instruction in schools. While English remains the most commonly used language, the government made an effort to preserve Chinese identity by promoting Chinese culture, mainly Confucian values, in 1980s (Chia, 2015, p. 6), partly to boycott the perceived over-westernization as a result of the prevailing use of English language.

Already viewed as “one of the most plural societies in the world” (Tan, 2012, p. 449), Singapore has

witnessed a steady development towards further diversities and multiple identities with a growing mobilities of foreigners since late 1980s, when the government took an active step to recruit high-skilled foreign workers (Iwasaki, 2015, p. 2). The so-called “foreign talents” are usually highly educated professionals able to boost or strengthen Singapore’s workforce and contribute to its overall development in areas like technology, social science, and humanity. The import of foreign talents was in accord with the leaders’ eugenics theories, hoping these intellectuals or high-skilled foreign workers to eventually become new immigrants and their offspring naturalized Singaporeans. While these foreign talents came from various races and nations, the major portion were ethnic Chinese, most of them received high-leveled Western education.

In the 1990s, Singapore’s leading Universities—National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technologic University (NTU)—recruited large numbers of US educated Chinese scholars. Such an input of “foreign” talents in high education institutions served dual purposes: to help maintain Chinese-majority state, and to meet the leader’s eugenics theory. These Chinese scholars in Singapore and across Asia formed new diasporas and became the catalyst for further cultural diversities. Political commentator Zheng Yongnian and sociologist Zhang Hanyin, for examples, have made their impact felt; Grant Shen, on the other hand, exemplified the multifaceted Asian phenomenon with his stage interpretations of a canonical Chinese opera—*The West Wing* (2008).

While NUS and NTU employ American/European educated ethnic Chinese PhDs born in China, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Hong Kong, the majority of them were of China origin with US PhDs. Shen is among the majority. He joined theatre program under Department of English Language and Literature in 1994 soon after he obtained PhD of Theatre from University of Hawaii. This case study focuses on this Chinese scholar-director and his contemporary production of a classical Chinese drama to explore issues of mobilities, identities, and diversities in Asia.

Mobilities/Identities of the Canonic Drama and the Scholar-Director

The West Wing, better known as *The Story of the Western Chamber*, is the title of Grant Shen’s stage translation of the monumental Chinese play *Xixiang ji*. Composed by Wang Shifu (ca. 1250-1300), *Xixiang ji* emerged in the Yuan dynasty (1234-1368) when China was ruled by Mongolians—an era marked by social mobility and cultural diversity. The encounter of the nomadic Mongolian practices and the conservative Confucian codes formed an inevitable backdrop for the productions of the golden-age Chinese drama. Wang’s *Xixiang ji* was celebrated by theatregoers but condemned by Confucian scholars during much of the pre-modern China. Its story of a love affair between a gentry lady and a scholar without parental approval pointedly challenged the prescribed social norm in traditional China. And its highly charged romantic scenes were deemed offensive by conventional moralists. *Xixiang ji* experienced repeated official bans, which, nonetheless, failed to stop its circulation and performance.

The mobilities of *Xixiang ji* can be seen in its numerous reproductions, imitations, parodies, and adaptations since its production. Its mobilities are not limited in its native land; it is also claimed to have the highest number of inter-lingual translation among classic Chinese works (Jiang, 2009, p. 163). Chinese people could have taken *Xixiang ji*, a canonic masterpiece, as identity of Chinese drama. In addition to the wide spread of texts within and outside China, *Xixiang ji* has been adapted for various types of performances on stage or via media circulating among Asian countries. Such mobilities reveal its rich potential for interpretations. *The West Wing*, produced by Grant Shen, has come to be the first English stage performance of *Xixiang ji*. The identities

and mobilities of the director, Grant Shen, a highly-educated scholar recruited to Singapore from US, are worth exploring alongside with his innovative multi-cultural production.

Grant Shen's dual professional identities as scholar and director are derived from his solid classic Chinese foundation in China (his home country) and arduous academic training of theatre in America. Shen's first degree of BA/MA was Chinese literature in Shanghai Normal University, where he became a lecturer of classic Chinese literature. Well-versed in classic Chinese language and literature at the same time deep-rooted in traditional Chinese culture, Shen, however, uprooted himself in 1986 at the age of 34, and moved to America for the pursuit of PhD in theatre—almost a totally different field—at the University of Hawaii at Manoa (UHM). Already a mature scholar of classic Chinese when moving to America, Shen's initial identity of Chinese scholar was not likely to suffer erosion or reduction when he got himself soaked into the Western scholarship in an English-speaking foreign land. The eight years of American learning experience transformed Shen into Asian theatre scholar, which became his primary professional identity, and with which he was recruited by NUS to teach in Theatre Studies of the Department of English Language and Literature. Shen's affiliation to theatre program in Singapore enabled him to develop another layer of professional identity as director, which would otherwise remain dormant even with all the training in UHM.

Shen's added professional identities were formulated in the US and deepened in Singapore. Shen was under rigorous training of Western scholarship in UHM's Department of Theatre and Dance, in which he availed himself of broad and in-depth learning of subjects like world theatre, feminist theatre and directing with a focus on Asian theatre. The theatre program at the University of Hawaii has been renowned for its Asian theatre productions and course offerings. Coursework there usually goes hand in hand with productions staged in the spacious Kennedy Theatre or the intimate Earle Ernst Lab Theatre. Most significantly, Shen's advisor Elizabeth Wichmann has been well-known for her English productions of Beijing opera; she is the first one to enable non-Chinese to sing Chinese opera in English, and her performance team had been invited to tour China three times winning critical acclaim (Hsiung, 2013, pp. 130-131). Conducive learning environment coupled with personal endeavor and tenacity have transformed Shen from scholar of classical Chinese to Asian theatre researcher and director, and from a scholar of Chinese mindset into a scholar of Western and international mindset. Other obvious transformations included conversion from atheist to Christian, and from less than adequate English to highly proficient English ability. Shen was empowered with his initial step of distant mobility—from China to America, which becomes his “new start” (Miller, 1996, p. 223), ready for his second step of Asia-bound mobility—from America to Singapore.

While recruited as foreign talent and the “Western scholar”, Shen came with double origins and double cultural identities. Shen moved to Singapore from Hawaii in 1994 when Theatre Studies within Department of English Language and Literature was still a young program in need of qualified faculty. While the US training has transformed him into Asian theatre scholar, Shen's teaching career in Singapore strengthened and developed his professional identities. In Singapore, Shen's primary professional identity was steadily fortified as Asian theatre specialist, while his initial identity of classic Chinese scholar has turned into backdrop working hand in hand with his current identity especially in his English productions of Chinese opera. Shen appears to be the pioneering scholar-director there to transform traditional Chinese plays into English stage. The five plays Shen has directed are as follows: the Chinese *zaju* opera, *Freed by a Flirt* (1995); the Japanese kabuki play, *Sukeroku Flower of Edo* (1998); the Indian Sanskrit dance-drama, *Shakuntala of the Mahabharata* (2002); the Chinese *chuanqi* opera, *The West Wing* (2008); and the Chinese remake of his *The West Wing* (2016), directed

under invitation by Yale-NUS College. While Shen's first English production of Chinese play of 1995 basically followed his advisor Wichmann's mode of having student performers sing in the tune of Beijing opera, his second Chinese play of 2008 displayed a breakthrough, exhibiting his own unique style of innovation. To demonstrate his expertise that goes beyond Chinese theatre, Shen even challenged himself to direct Japanese kabuki (1998) and Indian Sanskrit drama (2002).

Shen's journey to the West and then back to the multicultural Asian country Singapore manifests an upward mobility. His professional identities were expanded with each move so do his cultural identities, which contribute to his innovative renaissance production of Chinese opera. As for the mobilities of traditional Chinese drama *Xixiang ji* within or beyond Chinese regions via adaptations, translations, or performances, they demonstrate the play's potential resourcefulness for interpretations. Most of the play's versions and translations more or less fell under the domain of Chinese culture, making it an expression of Chinese identity. Grant Shen's unique experiences of mobilities enable him to make a difference, in favor of Singaporean theatregoers. However, his innovative interpretation of *Xixiang ji* challenged Chinese audience's horizon of aesthetics expectation, so did their collective identity, when the same performance toured to China, his homeland.

Diversities in *The West Wing* (2008)

To stage such a traditional Chinese play in contemporary multicultural Singapore, it is inevitable to display varying degrees of cultural diversities in various aspects. In this paper, the diversities to be focused on include Shen's production crew, the choice of Western pop music, the additional scene, and the translation of "forbidden" sex scene. By the time Shen directed this play, he has worked in Singapore for more than 10 years, and has directed three large-scale public productions with success. Shen should have learnt Singaporean audience's taste and gained confidence in breaking away from conventions. In other words, he could have obtained more self-reliance in his exercise of innovation—to domesticate the canonic Chinese play on Singapore stage by infusing ingredients of three cultures, such as Chinese opera acting, American music, and Singaporean diction.

The diversity of *The West Wing* troupe is part and parcel of the diversity of the production. Shen's production team was composed of students of different majors in NUS, though the majority of them majored in Theatre Studies. They are as multiracial as Singapore's society. In addition to local Singaporeans (mostly ethnic Chinese and a few ethnic Indians), there are foreign students from Malaysia, China, and Canada, further diversifying the company members. A most striking stage image is the Canadian Caucasian student acting as male lead, Zhang; his prior music theatre experience at his home country added flavor and enriched the overall performance. Shen made another critical move to entrust the crew with music selection:

Almost all of the 35 company members are in their early twenties or late teens, and well acquainted with the music and musical genres of their time. A generation apart, I have left music selection to the company through the voting process. (Shen, 2008, p. 2)

While each has his/her own specific role, all company members contribute to the music of the performance. Music adopted in *The West Wing* thus reflected the most popular tunes among the young mind of diverse races in Singapore.

Adoption of modern music manifests a primary diversity from the prevailing performance of *Xixiang ji*, usually sung to traditional Chinese tunes as *kunqu* opera or Beijing opera. Shen, however, justified his practice as "true performative spirit" (Shen, 2008, p. 2). His deviation from convention appears to derive from his

expertise in Chinese drama and world theatre. He forcefully argued that all the classic theatres today were popular theatres in their times; the golden-age Chinese opera in particular had followed popular tune of its own time. He comments on the current practice in the opera house in which the audiences listen to music hundreds of years ago, considering it to be an appreciation of “the operatic art as cultural heritage or communal identity” (Shen, 2008, p. 2). Shen’s experimental production appears to be the first in Singapore and unprecedentedly in the history of Chinese theatre. He claimed his practice to be the rightful one with such assertion:

Music is the soul of Chinese opera. In order for a modern audience to experience Chinese opera in its true performative spirit, modern music—instead of classical music—must be employed. This is why you are listening to music contemporary to your time in this production, as millions of Chinese opera fans did in theirs, centuries ago. (Shen, 2008, p. 2)

All the pieces of modern music were collectively chosen to match the context of the classic libretto, which in turn were translated into contemporary English to fit in the selected melodies. Shen’s *The West Wing* was based on Ming *chuanqi* version about 450 years ago when *kunqu* was the popular music adopted then. Shen could have used *kunqu* music, still alive today; but he concerned more about audience nowadays not able to experience what Ming audience had experienced with their familiar tune. Shen proclaimed his modern music adoption as “following the Ming practice of employing popular contemporary melodies” (Shen, 2012, p. 194). As there are many more types of popular music now than the Ming time, Shen tasked a music team from his company to select from several kinds of Western pop music for English-speaking audience; the team’s main duty was to identify the suitability of popular melodies for libretto of *The West Wing*. To aim for correspondence between the mood of the melody and that of the aria, there were ongoing “earnest negotiations” and “collective excitement” among the music team, director, and other company members (Shen, 2012, pp. 195-196), which could be all the more fervent and dynamic within a multicultural and multiracial crew. As director, Shen made utmost effort to maximize audience recognition of the melody and acceptance of the lyrical match, as he states: “To ensure the popularity and suitability of the music, any melody proposed for an aria had to survive both what we termed a ‘vote of familiarity’ and a ‘vote of compatibility’ by our company of thirty-five” (Shen, 2012, p. 196). The music chosen—such as “Fever” by Peggy Lee for the scene of Zhang’s lovesickness, and “Memory” from *Cats* (Musical) for the farewell scene¹—reflects the multiplicity of Asian Millennials.

Apart from musical diversity, an additional subversive scene attached to Scene 24 brings the old play to the contemporary context and furthers its entertainment effect. Scene 24 “Jumping over the Wall” features Zhang’s midnight visit to the female lead Yingying upon receiving her suggestive poem, but is scolded by Yingying instead for his imprudent act. This scene has become subject of scholarly debates regarding the abrupt change of Yingying’s attitude. Two common explanations are: Yingying’s change of mind is due to a conscious restraint by decorum of an upper-class young lady; or Yingying is aware of her maidservant’s presence and thus becomes pretentious in her act of reprimanding Zhang. Shen has taken the second explanation to dramatize Yingying’s joyful mood before Zhang’s visit, excitement in greeting Zhang, and a sudden change into rebuking Zhang upon noting her maidservant nearby. As part of Yingying’s rebuking, Shen adeptly adds a scene of Yingying executing “virginity test” on Zhang, assisted by her chambermaid Hongniang, which brings the performance to a climax².

¹ See “Chuanqi Opera The West Wing B 2” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oUrQrGqEc4I> (11:58) and “The West Wing 4” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N_NAOIKhMm0&feature=relmfu (2:54).

² See “Chuanqi Opera The West Wing B 2” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oUrQrGqEc4I> (4:30).

Unheard of either in the play text or previous performance, the scene of “virginity test” is Shen’s post-modern innovation ringing feminist overtone to please contemporary audience, especially the female. This addition could be the director’s intention to flaunt his expertise in double entendre, which was rich in golden-age dramas; and he deliberately has it set in contemporary context to connect to audience and to entertain them. On the stage, Yingying is seen as the one in power position to question Zhang’s virginity with a series of riddle carrying double meanings—one risky while the other innocent; Hongniang is ready to cane the kneeling Zhang when he is not able to answer. While the dramatization of their acts appears comic and creates entertainment effect, such a gender-reversal scene presents vivid diversity to previous performances.

The third area of diversity in *The West Wing* to be examined is Shen’s stage translation of the most controversial scene that led to its constant official ban in history. This scene was the first poetic narration of detailed love-making process in pre-modern Chinese drama. It was since condemned for its vivid description of sex, rendering it a licentious work, by conventional moralists; concurrently, it was highly praised by liberal literati for its exquisite art surpassing time and space (Jiang, 2009, pp. 160-162). Among the existing stage performances, this scene was basically absent, and was replaced with either chorus singing in the background or Hongniang singing on the stage, while the lovebirds were absent from audience’s view. Shen observed the prior performances of eliminating sex scenes as distortion, largely due to censorship, and did not reflect the performance reality of the play during its heyday (Shen, 2013, pp. 205-207). He thus boldly had such scenes acting out on the stage. The diversities in his translation include libretto translation and stage direction.

Scene 28 in *The West Wing* heading “A Clandestine Meeting in the Moonlight” features Yingying’s nighttime visit to Zhang and the progress of Zhang’s physical intimacy with her. The libretti in this scene are sung from Zhang’s perspective. Shen transformed all the classic Chinese expression and allusions into idiomatic and colloquial English, similar to Disney’s linguistic strategy of balancing “familiarity and otherness” (Di Giovanni, 2003, p. 215) in animated film adaptation of foreign tales. Hence, on the stage, audience can see the love-stricken male lead sings in the tune of “Crazy Little Thing They Call Love” (by Queen) with lines like: “Had I known of suffering nights and days, I’d have fled from this fatal attractive!” (Shen, 2008, p. 10) when anxiously awaiting Yingying’s arrival. Upon seeing Yingying, he acts out his ecstasy of beauty appreciation, undressing, and love consummation, singing in popular tunes like “Can you Feel the Love Tonight” (by Elton John) and “Wonderful Tonight” (by Eric Clapton). The obvious deviation in translation can be seen in the following stanza:

[上馬嬌] “Shangmajiao”(Zhang sings:)	Sung to the tune of Wonderful Tonight by Eric Clapton [to the tune of Shangmajiao]
我將這鈕兒鬆， I loosen the knotted buttons, 縷帶兒解。 Untie her silken waistwrap; 蘭麝散幽齋。 Orchid musk spreads through my secluded study 不良會把人禁害， O cruel one, you can really make me suffer. 咳，怎不肯回過臉兒來? (頁483) Ai, Why aren’t you willing to turn your face to me? (West & Idema, 1995, p. 228)	Why are so many buttons on her cape? Is this the wrap to untie her shape? Or is her fragrance sealed under that tape? My little tease may aim a jape— She turns away as if fighting a rape. (Shen, 2008, p. 10)

Lines in the left are source text and nearly literal translation by West and Idema, while Shen's is on the right. Shen transformed Zhang's singing narrations of undressing Yingying with a sigh of her slowness to face him into impatiently questioning the numerous buttons on her dress. Shen pushed further the source meaning to show how eager Zhang is, and he even uses strong word as rape to create stunning effect. Such diversity or betrayal in translation, nonetheless, allows more stage actions such as Zhang continuously unbuttoning and Yingying's re-buttoning as well as their chasing on the stage³. Yingying in this scene has changed from a scolding judge to a shy and demure lady in love. The performance of love-making scene on stage, though still more or less symbolically for the young, appears to be the first attempt in the recent century, thus presenting another striking diversity.

Conclusions

The case of Shen's mobilities and his contemporary interpretation of the canonic Chinese play *The West Wing* exhibit the growing multifaceted Asian phenomenon. The mobilities of Shen from China to America and then to Singapore witnessed an increase of identities rather than the loss of any as evident in *The West Wing*. Though only one of the many recruited foreign talents in Singapore under the preferred category of ethnic Chinese, Shen's deep root in Chinese classics and solid training of Western scholarship in Asian theatre enabled him to produce such an opera which integrates tradition and contemporary impulses with innovation. *The West Wing* thus displays layers of cultural diversities, as seen in the co-existence of authentic Chinese acting style, Western pop culture, American diction, and multiracial features of Singapore.

The scholar-director Shen and his English productions of classic Asian plays made some difference and further contributed to cultural diversities in the landscape of performing arts in Singapore. *The West Wing*, in particular, was an immense success in Singapore; it ran for six public performances rather than one or two as other traditional Chinese opera productions did. The fusion of old Chinese art and Western fashion appeals to local critics. It received heaping positive comments from local newspapers and online media with applauding headings like: "Chinese opera gets extreme makeover" (*The Straits Times*, April 3, 2008), "Breathing fresh air into Asian theatre", and "Touch of modern influence in an age-old craft" (Shen, 2013, p. 201; Hsiung, 2012, p. 50). Shen observed the response of audience towards this opera, mostly in their late teens and twenties, as "night after night, the *West Wing* audience laughed, screamed, stamped, and hummed pop tunes with the role-players" (Shen, 2013, p. 201). He could be viewed as achieving his target with his innovative attempt to restore the performance of this traditional drama into popular theatre, as it was centuries ago, though with assistance from contemporary devices.

The identity issues, however, became glaring when Shen and *The West Wing* toured their native land, China, soon after the performances in Singapore. There were two performances in Shanghai; the reception there, however, was mixed rather than overwhelmingly affirmative as in Singapore. While the young college students welcomed the new features in the opera, the majority of older generation, mainly drama critics, seemed to frown upon its many deviations from Chinese tradition. Understandably, the major population of China was still more or less homogeneous in terms of identity, while the younger generation was getting more and more receptive towards Western culture and would not mind diverse representation of their traditional art. *The West Wing* challenged conventional viewers' sense of Chinese identity, seeing Western pop music as an invasion of

³ See "The West Wing 3" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8i5T5NFMM8c> (1:23-3:35).

the classic Chinese play, symbolic of their communal identity; one report even called it “distortion of Chinese art” (*Youth News*, May 29, 2008). Most critics were mixed with affirmation and reservation, showing appreciation of Shen’s audacious innovation or reflection upon feasible adaptation of Chinese classics. One rather positive review was from Zhang Deming, scholar of comparative literature, who insightfully viewed *The West Wing* as a product of Singapore’s hybrid culture and the creative energy of the director and his multiracial performers as deriving from their distance to their home culture; he affirmed Chinese classics as able to enter the mind of contemporary people via pop culture (Hsiung, 2012, p. 51).

Shen’s mobilities from China to Singapore via US evidenced a case of empowerment; such mobilities endow him with three cultural identities shown in his production of *The West Wing*. The cultural diversities in *The West Wing* exemplify Singapore’s multiracial and multicultural reality. While *The West Wing* is the creative input of Shen, one of the foreign talents recruited in 1990s, Singapore is also a country with growing potential to nourish such creativity. This study points to the multiplicity of Singapore as a fertile land for productions foretelling the plural future Asia.

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