

Research Article

“Why Then Should I Require an Audience”: The Dynamism and a Paradox of Spectatorship in *the Peach Blossom Fan*

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Abstract

As *The Mad Drummer* (狂鼓史) demonstrates a close correlation between performance and spectatorship, it appears baffling that the storyteller Liu Jingting claims that he does not need an audience in Kong Shangren's (孔尚任) *The Peach Blossom Fan* (桃花扇). In order to answer the question, this paper interprets *The Peach Blossom Fan* (桃花扇) as a dynamic realm with geographic and metaphorical places rather than a static literary text. Master of Ceremonies' multiple identities extend the notion of metaphorical displacement to an ongoing movement of shifting in and out the role inside performances. His repeated passages in and out the acting role and the performative realm signal a linear and cyclical dynamism. In terms of genre, a comparison between Ma Zhiyuan's (馬致遠) deliverance play “Yueh-yang Tower” (呂洞賓三醉岳陽樓) and the historical play *The Peach Blossom Fan* (桃花扇) further analyzes distinctive dynamisms in dreamscape and in theatricality. Moreover, an examination of Zhang Dai's (張岱) “Mid-September on West Lake (西湖七月半)” points out a concentric spectatorship and a paradox of spectatorship. Spectator's simultaneous states of being the subject and the object of gazing result in endless circles of watching and a concentric spectatorship with hierarchies. The paradox of spectatorship echoes the dynamism of *The Peach Blossom Fan* (桃花扇) with notions of liminality and ongoing movement, but restricts the dynamism due to endless layers of concentric spectatorship. Thus, we can answer the question by stating that although Liu Jingting (柳敬亭) desires to escape audience's gaze and has the ability to temporarily step out of theatricality, it is still impossible for him to completely escape the audience due to the paradox of spectatorship.

Keywords

Dynamism (動態性), Spectatorship (觀眾), Theatricality (戲劇性), Dreamscape (夢境), Drama (戲劇)

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1. Introduction

In *The Mad Drummer* (狂鼓史), the Judge's role as an audience in the play generates "a play inside a play" for the first time in existent Chinese scripts, which indicates that part of the legitimacy of a performance relies on the existence of spectatorship. Audience's gesture to watch a performance distinguishes the performative quality of a scene from the scene in real life. With a correlation between performance and spectatorship in mind, one scene in *The Peach Blossom Fan* (桃花扇) baffles me due to its inclination to abandon the spectatorship. In Scene 10 "The Letter (修札)," when Hou Fang-yü (侯方域) mocks at Liu Jingting's (柳敬亭) loneliness by saying "there is no audience. Pray, whom are you entertaining?" [1, 37, 40, 43-48, 51, 64] Liu Jingting (柳敬亭) refutes that "story-telling is my vocation. You play on your lute and chant poetry alone in your study. Why then should I require an audience?" [2] Comparing Liu's refutation with the significance of spectatorship in *The Mad Drummer* (狂鼓史), I come up with a question "why should Liu claims he does not need an audience in *The Peach Blossom Fan* (桃花扇)?"

The same scene occurs to Wai-ye Li (李惠儀) that, with regard to the function of performance in the dialectic of self and role, Liu's performing without an audience manifests lyrical self-containment and quintessential self-expression. [3] Stephen Owen (宇文所安) touches upon a gap between "character" and the role played by the character, and attributes the gap to a vanishing point where the distinction breaks down. [4] However, neither would I rather approach the scene as one individual gesture within a larger motif of the dramatic illusion between history and interoperation of history, nor do I aim to examine a binary of *zhen* (真) and *jia* (假) expressed in *The Peach Blossom Fan* (桃花扇). I would like to point out the liminal nature of characters' identities in this play by examining two dialogues and the Master of Ceremony figure in the play. [5] The character's liminality and double roles create a gap between two edges, a space enabling his-ongoing movement. In this paper, I will interpret *The Peach Blossom Fan* (桃花扇) as a dynamic realm manifested through character's liminality and ongoing movement rather than a static literary text. Then by examining Zhang Dai's (張岱) "Mid-September on West Lake (西湖七月半)," I will point out a concentric spectatorship and a paradox of spectatorship. I will extend the dynamism in *The Peach Blossom Fan* (桃花扇) to the dynamism in theatricality by drawing a comparison to the dynamism in dreamscape in the context of "Yueh-yang Tower" (呂洞賓三醉岳陽樓). Eventually I will argue that a concentric spectatorship traps the movement of characters in *The Peach Blossom Fan* (桃花扇) so that the dynamism of the play reveals character's inability to escape spectatorship. Thus, we can answer the question by stating that although Liu Jingting (柳敬亭) desires to escape

audience's gaze and has the ability to temporarily-step out of theatricality, it is still impossible for him to completely escape the audience due to the paradox of spectatorship.

2. *The Peach Blossom Fan* (桃花扇)

The mobile realm in *The Peach Blossom Fan* (桃花扇) abstracts each character as one movable spot and constructs both geographical and metaphorical places within mapping of the performance for characters to remain in motion. As Master of Ceremonies clarifies in the prologue of the play-"both plot and protagonists [are] drawn from life," [6] each character occupies two identities simultaneously in the play-the "character" in real life and the role played by the character, [7] resulting in a liminal nature of their double identities. Identity becomes a metaphorical place when it refers to a social position or an occupation in the society. In the dialogue between Liu Jingting (柳敬亭) and Hou Fangyu (侯方域) in Scene 10 "The Letter (修札)," repetitions of the term "audience" suggest that both Hou and Liu are aware of the existence of spectatorship and their situation of being watched. Hou assumes that Liu's storytelling aims to entertain the audience by stating "he must have an audience around him." [8] Nevertheless, Liu recognizes a demarcation between an occupation as a storyteller and an actor acting as a storyteller. Liu's gesture to abandon the spectatorship reveals his tendency to move from the actor Liu Jingting (柳敬亭) in performance to the storyteller Liu Jingting (柳敬亭) in real life. Without spectators, Hou's playing flute and chanting poetry and Liu's storytelling lose their performative qualities and appear as merely gestures for vocations or self-entertainment. Thus, we can see the possibility and inclination for Liu Jingting (柳敬亭) to metaphorically move from one place to another.

With multiple identities, the figure Master of Ceremonies extends the notion of metaphorical displacement to an ongoing movement of shifting in and out the role inside the performance, presenting the liminality of characters and repeated pattern of movement. In the "Prologue," he appears as an outsider to introduce the performance and points out his other roles such as an audience of *The Peach Blossom Fan* (桃花扇), a witness in history and a role "included in the drama (戲中之人)." [6] His multiple identities imply correspondent geographic realms of spectatorship, performance and history. He not only keeps shifting from one role to another, but also moving from one realm to another in terms of both geographic places and metaphorical places. In Scene 3, he manages a ceremony at the temple as a role "included in the drama (戲中之人)," which validates his statement in the "Prologue" and echoes with Juan's statement in Scene 12 "Brushing my eyebrows and beard again, I shall play a role

in a drama (鬚眉扮作戲中人).” [9] In the “Prologue to Scene 21,” Master of Ceremonies shows up again as an outside commentator. In Scene 32, he not only acts as an imperial announcer of ceremonies, but also reveals his identity as the cousin of the late emperor. Multiple identities of Master of Ceremonies manifest his liminality that allows him to keep entering and exiting performances as sometimes an actor in the play and sometimes an outsider out of the performance. Thus, besides only remaining a liminal state between the self in reality and character in performance, Master of Ceremonies highlights various repeated passages in and out the acting role as well as the performative realm, signaling both a linear and cyclical dynamism in *The Peach Blossom Fan* (桃花扇).

Besides Master of Ceremonies’ repeated gesture to move in and out the dramatic illusion, we can also see a self-consciousness of the notion of play-acting from a dialogue between Juan Dacheng (阮大鍼) and Ma Shiying (馬士英) in Scene 24:

Juan: ...we shall be our simple selves without play-acting.

Ma: Don’t talk about acting, I beg. Actors can be dangerous fellows. When they impersonate a character successfully, he will live forever in the image of this caricature. [10].

Juan makes an ironic pun of “play-acting” to deceive others by acting out the behavior, while Ma literally interprets the word as skills of acting in a performance. Misapprehension points out that there is a demarcation between the self in reality and the self playing a role in the performance. Ma Shiying (馬士英) reveals the dangerous potential beneath the professionalism of acting. Vivid impersonation of a character can trap a person into the fabricated role and prevent him from moving out of the performative realm, resulting in a static exception within the dynamism of *The Peach Blossom Fan* (桃花扇). Fragrance Princess (李香君) fits into this category since she dedicates to leading her life as Du Liniang (杜麗娘), trapping herself in the role of an actress. Recalling her adolescent blankness at the beginning of the play, we can interpret that Fragrance Princess (李香君) does not have her self in history, but only develops her identity in the performance from blankness. Her static exception stems from her unawareness of her other half identity so that she only roams in her limited role as a genuine *dan*. [11].

3. The Dream Recollections of Tao-an (陶庵夢憶)

Not only do characters in the performance reflect the ongoing movement and liminality, but spectators themselves denote liminal identities as manifested in Zhang Dai’s (張岱) “Mid-September on West Lake (西湖七月半)” in *The Dream Recollections of Tao-an* (陶庵夢憶), which categorizes “five kinds of looking.” [12] Particularly, the third kind

of looking catches my attention:

They are also right under the moon, and they do look at the moon, but want others to look at them look at the moon (亦在月下，亦看月，而欲人看其看月者，看之). [13].

This kind of people, on one hand, appreciate the moon by observing it, but, on the other hand, aspire to a gaze from others. They watch the scenery and become part of the scenery of those who watch them. According to Sophie Volpp (袁書菲), Zhang Dai (張岱) employs the tension between dispassionate observation and passionate engagement characteristic of theatrical spectatorship. [14, 38, 40-41, 49-50, 52-63, 65-70] Hence, the liminality of spectators manifests through their simultaneous state of being the subject and the object of gazing—both as spectators and as part of a scene that belongs to outer-layer spectators, resulting in endless circles of watching as well as a concentric spectatorship with one external loop containing another inner one. The vision of the fourth kind of spectators includes the moon, those looking at the moon and those not looking at the moon, incorporating the first three kinds of spectators as well as the scene they are looking at. Therefore, there is a hierarchy within the concentric spectatorship as spectators of the outer layer catch sight of more scenes as well as all spectators of inner layers. The last kind of spectator enjoys the superiority of vision because he hides himself to prevent being watched and looks at the moon and all former four spectators at the same time.

Nevertheless, if we recall the beginning of “Mid-September on West Lake (西湖七月半),” we will notice that Zhang Dai (張岱) actually watches all those five kinds of spectators all the time:

There is nothing at all to look at on West Lake in mid-September but people looking at the mid-September moon (西湖七月半，一無可看，止可看七月半之人). [15].

Therefore, with regard to a hierarchy of spectatorship, Zhang Dai (張岱) is at the highest level of the hierarchy as he watches the scenery of West Lake and documents all people looking at the mid-September moon in the short essay. However, since the liminality of spectators suggests that it is impossible to be a pure spectator, even if Zhang Dai (張岱) temporarily ranks highest among spectators, he is probably watched by other people. As a consequence, the hierarchy of spectatorship leads to a paradox of spectatorship. Just as in Zhuangzi’s paradox of dream, there is no absolute state of being in the dream or being awake in the reality, but there is always an ongoing process of “transformation of things (物化).” [16] Similarly in the paradox of spectatorship, there is neither a pure state of being a spectator nor of being at the highest position in the hierarchy of spectatorship, but there is always an in-between condition of looking at others and being looked at simultaneously.

The paradox of spectatorship echoes the dynamism of *The Peach Blossom Fan* (桃花扇) with the notion of liminality and ongoing movement, but restricts the dynamism due to

endless layer of concentric spectatorship. The concentric spectatorship sets borders for the mobile realm of *The Peach Blossom Fan* (桃花扇) to allow oscillating movement within the realm, but prevents the possibility from completely escaping from the realm. I will further extend the dynamism in *The Peach Blossom Fan* (桃花扇) to the dynamism in theatricality with a combination of movement, spectatorship and genres. According to Ling Hon Lam (林凌翰), the term “theatricality” suggests “an early modern mode of spatiality in which emotion is not interior to oneself but performed by others and, conversely, it is conceivable in oneself only as enacted on behalf of others or as exhibited to an audience without oneself seeing it.” [17].

Starting from an examination of one poem by Master of Ceremonies, I will point out two positions—a dreamer or a spectator—in a performance.

Then reality was like a play,

Now the play seems only too real.

Twice an observer at the side:

Heaven has preserved the one with cold eyes. [18].

Master of Ceremonies watches the performance twice: the dynasty shift is so dramatically traumatic and ridiculous that his witnessing of—history as a bystander resembles a dreamer watching a drama in a dreamscape; after many years, someone writes a play about the dynasty shift and Master of Ceremonies occupies the position of an observer to watch the history on stage. [19] He used to be a dreamer inside the dreamscape, but he later becomes a spectator to watch the performance from a distance, shifting from one spatial structure to another—dreamscape to theatricality. Master of Ceremonies’ movement reveals the demarcation between a dreamer and a spectator. [20] I will draw a generic comparison between the deliverance play “Yueh-yang Tower” (呂洞賓三醉岳陽樓) and the historical play *The Peach Blossom Fan* (桃花扇) to delve into the difference between a dreamer and a spectator.

Although both Master of Ceremonies and Lü Tung-pin have the gesture to laugh and weep in the play, the gesture has two distinctive implications in the two texts. In “Yueh-yang Tower” (呂洞賓三醉岳陽樓), “Lü weeps and laughs, laughs and weeps” [21] on the Yueh-yang Tower to sigh over historical vicissitude and laugh at the vanity of ambition. Lü Tung-pin’s stirred emotion manifests his indulgence of his experience and acting as a dreamer inside the dreamscape. The fact that he cannot exit the dreamscape but only keeps entering another layer of dreamscape suggests that Lü always occupies a position in the performance even in different layer of the dream. His emotional intensity aims to arouse the same emotion among audience so as to convert spectators to dreamers. The gesture to incorporate spectators into the performance protects the fabrication of a dreamscape. As deliverance plays serve for the spread of Daoism, they aim to transfer the notion of real presence to spectators and to convert spectators by presenting that theater as life. Characters and spectators all bear the assumption that they are in a dream and no one would like to break that illusion. [22] Therefore, the dynamism of characters

in dreamscape resembles an inward radiation within the premise of inside a performance.

4. Conclusion

If in early deliverance plays, that theater is life is presented through the mediation of Daoism, in later historical play *The Peach Blossom Fan* (桃花扇), life becomes a theater from a spectatorial perspective. As an audience of *The Peach Blossom Fan* (桃花扇), Master of Ceremonies is “stirred so deeply that [he] laughed and wept, raged and cursed by turns.” [6] Representation of history reminds him of his past memory. His emotional fluctuation serves as an immediate reaction to and a comment on the performance on stage. It is not the actors that actively invite him to engage in a process of synesthesia, but his connection to the performance is stirred up when life is relocated on the stage. Theatricality creates a safe position for spectators to sit back and prevent them from watching the scene in a less sacrificed way. Relying on the artificial distance, life becomes a performance on stage. The distance between Master of Ceremonies and *The Peach Blossom Fan* (桃花扇) he watches enables him to re-watch the traumatic history through the lens of aesthetic production. Therefore, theatricality derives from spectator’s consciousness of a framed performance and a process of watching a relocation of real life, all of which pointing to the relation between theater and spectators rather than between theater and actors. As Master of Ceremonies occupies the positions of a bystander and an insider of the performance at the same time, he keeps stepping in and out of the theatricality. [23] Therefore, the dynamism of characters in theatricality is more flexible with ongoing inner movement between metaphorical and geographic places as well as constantly shifting in and out of the theatricality. [24, 27-36, 39, 42].

Eventually, I will go back to the proposed question—“why Liu claims he does not need an audience in *The Peach Blossom Fan* (桃花扇)?” Liu is aware of his liminal identities, spectatorship and theatricality. It is reasonable for him to temporarily step out of theatricality as actors do not really need spectators to fulfill performances. However, it is impossible for him to escape spectatorship due to concentric spectatorship and the paradox of spectatorship. Even if Liu assumes he does not need an audience, there is always a certain audience looking at him. Kong Shangren (孔尚任) even acknowledges the existence of spectators outside the performance in *fanli* (凡例): “The spectator (觀者) should use discerning eyes (巨眼).” [25] Therefore, we can even claim that Liu Jingting is under our (readers’) gaze. According to Sophie Volpp’s (袁書菲) opinion, “freedom lies not in escaping one for the other, but in alternating between the two.” [26] Though trapped by spectatorship, Liu Jingting’s (柳敬亭) geographic and metaphorical place shifting and as well stepping in and out of theatricality actually manifests his largest freedom of movement within his liminality, implying the freedom of

dynamism in *The Peach Blossom Fan* (桃花扇).

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Biography

Vivien Jiaqian Zhu earned an A.B. (distinction) in comparative literature and Chinese literature, with a minor in history of art from UC Berkeley in 2018. She was a recipient of the Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Award in Comparative Literature, and a Regent's Scholar by the Graduate Division at UC Berkeley to pursue a Ph.D. degree. Her dissertation investigates the expression of self, the interior space/interiority, and architectural tropes in literature and art. Other research interests include relational aesthetics, fin-de-si ècle Vienna and epigraphy. From 2020 to 2021, she joined Stanford's Inter-University Center at Yokohama Japan as a Nippon Foundation Fellow. She also has an offer to commence a visiting scholar/Ph.D. joint position at Stanford University in fall 2022, which is part of an exchange program for scholars among Stanford University, UC Berkeley and UCSF. In 2024, she was appointed as a Mitsubishi Research Fellow to study early modern Japanese palaeography at University of Cambridge. In terms of professional writing, she serves as an editor for the *The Pegasus Review* at Stanford University School of Medicine, and as a columnist for the newspaper *The Stanford Daily*. Outside of Stanford, she serves as a peer reviewer for the *Cambridge Educational Research E-Journal* in the Faculty of Education. She also serves on the Editorial Board for *International Journal of Sustainable Fashion & Textiles*, Intellect Ltd. Her article "I Dwell in Possibility: The Poetics of Space in the Works of 1980s Japanese Avant-garde Fashion Designers" is the winner of ACA Best Researcher Award in History of Art, International Academic Awards, 2024, and listed for SSRN eJournal Top Papers - Art History eJournal Top Ten; Arts Administration, Museum Studies, Conservation & Restoration eJournal Top Ten; Aesthetics & Philosophy of Art Journal Top Ten; Anthropology of Kinship Top Ten; Gender, the Body & Sexuality eJournal Top Ten; Art Law eJournal Top Ten; Dance, Fashion, Theater & Performance Studies eJournal Top Ten; Poetry & Poetics eJournal Top Ten; Rhetoric & Public Discourse eJournal Top Ten; Visual, Performing & Fine Arts Education eJournal Top Ten; Literary Theory & Criticism eJournal Top Ten. Her first book, *Exploring Art, Knowledge and Movement in Japanese Fashion* (Eliva Press Global Ltd, April 9, 2025), tells a philosophical story of the Greek poein, avant-garde Japanese fashion designers, the Paris high fashion scene, and Chinese classics from early modern to contemporary times. It traverses the terrain of history of art, performance studies, religion, and the eighteenth-century literary masterpiece *The Dream of Red Chamber* (*Hongloumeng* 紅樓夢, *Story of the Stone* 石頭記).

Research Field

Vivien Jiaqian Zhu: Japanese Literature and Culture, Visual and Cultural Studies, Urban Studies, Religious Studies, Linguistic Anthropology, Japanese History.