

# Collision and Fusion of Chinese and Western Cultures: An Analysis of Space-Time Treatment in the Peking Opera Version of *Les Misérables*

Tao Chen

National Academy of Chinese Arts Beijing 100073

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**Abstract:** The Peking opera version of *Les Misérables* is based on the novel of the same name by French Romantic writer Victor Hugo. The difficulty in adapting such an epic masterpiece into a Peking opera for stage is conceivable, but through abundant use of creative thinking and through bold creation on the aesthetic principle of opera imagism (xieyi), the creators have come up with a great adaptation that captures the quintessence of the original novel. Through an analysis of space-time treatment in the Peking opera version of *Les Misérables*, this paper examines imagistic space-time treatment in traditional Chinese opera to explore the possibilities of adapting and transplanting Western classics into traditional Chinese opera.

**Keywords:** *Les Misérables*; Imagism; Space-time; Collision; Fusion

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## 1 Novel theme and stage adaptation

Victor Hugo, the author of the novel *Les Misérables*, was a representative of the French Romantic writers, a leading figure in the French Romantic movement of the early 19th century, and a prominent novelist of bourgeois democracy in the history of French literature. Living through almost all the major events in 19th-century France, Hugo wrote a great number of poems, novels, plays, prose pieces, literary reviews and political essays and was considered as an influential figure in France. It took Hugo more than 30 years to produce *Les Misérables*, which was conceived in 1828, written in 1845 and completed in 1861 as a literary masterpiece that best embodies Hugo's literary techniques and thoughts. With Jean Valjean's rough, miserable life as the main thread, the novel exposes the miserable fate of laborers and denounces the capitalist system resulting in the situation.

Jean Valjean is depicted not just in sympathy for the underclass or in criticism of reality, but Hugo also uses this character as the embodiment of his humanitarianism. The power of humanitarianism, under the author's pen, is so huge that Valjean turns from a convict into a benevolent mayor and that even the ruthless police inspector Javert yields to morality and ends his own life in a mental breakdown. Moralizing and reforming society seems to be Hugo's only approach to society. In his view, acute class contradictions are actually a matter of morality, so moralizing is able to eliminate social evils and resolve all social contradictions. This is obviously a utopian Reformist proposition, reflecting the limitations of the author's bourgeois worldview. The character Jean Valjean, created by Hugo's bourgeois humanitarian moralizing, seems unreal, and some of his changes seem also illogical, just to serve author's self-expression need, which are precisely the limitations of this great work.

*Les Misérables* is a realistic novel with a Romantic flavor. The author presents a vast panorama of French social life through dramatic historical events and stormy mass struggles that create a strong sense of history. The dramatization of the plot, the recurrence of accidents and coincidences, the use of contrast and the exaggerated description of characters give the novel a distinct Romantic flavor.

*Les Misérables* is a huge story, covering almost all facets and all strata of French society at the time. The difficulty in adapting such a huge story into a script, notably an opera script, is conceivable. A traditional Chinese opera script is generally in a dot-line structure, with a beginning and an end, with a main event and thread running through its sequential development. Given that the script capacity is limited by opera acting modes, the content of the novel cannot be completely contained but selectively reproduced in the opera.

For the creators of the Peking opera version of *Les Misérables*, how to present this classic work on stage and how to interpret it in a modern context is an issue that demands deliberation. Instead of deconstructing the original novel, the creators have retained the quintessence of the novel and even reinforced the theme of the novel. The opera pivots around Jean Valjean's difficult, legendary and glorious life. The main conflict is between Valjean and Javert, interspersed with Valjean's conflict with Marius and Cosette, with Fantine and with Thénardier and Madame Thénardier and Marius's conflict with Thénardier. The script has structurally weakened the novel's historical setting, social formation and social classes, but much ink has been spilled on the complicated thoughts and feelings of the characters at critical moments. A few important events of the novel are selected as the main plot of the script: the bishop's

forgiveness; the rescue of Fantine on the street; the rescue of little Cosette; the release of Javert in the barricade battle; the rescue of Marius on the battlefield; the marriage between Marius and Cosette; Thénardier's racketeering and Marius's enlightenment; Javert's suicide.

The script, faithful to the original novel, seeks to express the profound theme of the novel in an opera narrative. The power of moralizing is amplified and emphasized in the opera. From Bishop Myriel moralizing Valjean to Valjean moralizing Javert and Marius, goodness and selflessness are ubiquitous in the opera. With much ink spilled on the thoughts and feelings of those living in *Les Misérables*, the script attempts to portray Valjean, an idealized character in the novel, as a real, flesh-and-blood person.

## 2 General treatment principles

The use of opera to present foreign classics on Chinese stage is commonplace. From Hebei Bangzi *Thebes* and *Medea* (adapted from ancient Greek myths) to Peking opera *The Kingdom of Desire* (adapted by Taiwan Peking Opera Troupe from William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*) and Peking opera *The Tragedy of Prince Zi Dan* (adapted by Shanghai Peking Opera Troupe from William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*) to Sichuan opera *Madame Macbeth* (adapted from William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*), a multitude of adaptations of Western masterpieces have appeared on opera stage. The appearance of these adaptations is of great significance to the communication and collision between Chinese and Western cultures. All the works mentioned above share one thing in common: telling foreign stories in the form of traditional Chinese opera. Thick-soled boots and python-patterned pleated robes mark the traditional or improved appearance of actors in traditional Chinese opera. In some operas, the names of the characters in the original work are retained. In some other operas, foreign stories are transplanted to Chinese stage and the names of the characters are also changed to Chinese ones, with the whole story set in China, with only the core conflict and idea of the original work retained, so that the audience without knowledge of the original work will take it as traditional Chinese opera. To present foreign classics in either mode, we may draw heavily on stylized acting in traditional opera, making "foreigners" live on opera stage in the form of Chinese characters.

Nevertheless, neither of the acting modes was adopted for script creation of the Peking opera version of *Les Misérables*. The creators chose a difficult and challenging path: while the story, plot, characters and location of the original novel are retained and the costumes remain largely the same as in 19th-century France, proper changes are made and decorative features of opera are mixed into the script. The difficulty of this path is that the actors must break with the technical mode of traditional opera to create a new stylized acting mode in their performance, not only fathoming and extracting the external movements of French people living in the 19th century, but also stylizing, rhythmizing and dancing these movements. In one word, the final performance should be a blend of physical features of French people and stylized characteristics of Chinese opera, so that the audience can not only find the trace of French people living at the time but also enjoy the unique dance charm of traditional Chinese opera in the performance of the actors. Without any frame of reference, every movement of the actors on stage needs to be explored, so the creators must take pains to innovate a new acting mode under strict stylizing and dancing opera norms.

At the core of aesthetic pursuit of traditional Chinese opera lies imagism. In traditional Chinese opera, "vivid imagism centers on the treatment of virtual and real and of space and time in terms of artistic expression".<sup>1</sup>

The core pursuit of imagism is also embodied in the overall treatment of the Peking opera version of *Les Misérables* from script structure to stage presentation. The choice of costumes, the design of lighting and setting, the performance of actors, the use of music and the collaboration of dancers are in consistent pursuit of the vivid imagistic aesthetic that essentially characterizes traditional Chinese opera.

## 3 Scene-by-scene analysis of space-time treatment

Space-time treatment in the Peking opera version of *Les Misérable* follows the aesthetic principle of imagistic space-time. Amidst challenges, the creators engaged in painstaking exploration to display the quintessence of the epic novel on stage in a distinctive opera form. In response to new demands on opera art in the new era, the creators have blazed a trail through bold innovation.

The switch of stage space-time in traditional Chinese opera is achieved by the actors' performance: all the changes and developments in space and time are performed by the actors' body movements, singing and dancing. Imagistic space-time requires empty acting space for the spirit of stylized acting to flow out, and the performance of actors is the undoubted agent of creation. In the modern aesthetic environment, the mere pursuit of performance seems unable to satisfy the diverse needs of audiences, since modern audiences want to gain more information when they enter the theater. While ensuring the actors' performance is still at the center of opera, the creators must see that stage art (setting, lighting, costumes, etc.) carries more information to satisfy the needs of audiences. Stage art must be creative to create a strong visual impact on stage, but this isn't in blind pursuit of a big-budget production, of course.

In telling an epic story like *Les Misérable*, the creators must give the audience a strong visual impact as the curtain rises to hold their attention in the first few minutes; otherwise, the play cannot unfold smoothly and the audience cannot sit and watch attentively.

The prologue of *Les Misérable* shows a group of prisoners suffering and laboring to a somber accompaniment. The dancers struggle painfully in the messy quarry, chiseling, shoving, or carrying...while they have to ensure the prison guard's merciless whipping. "We see poverty swallowing goodness and hear hunger consuming morality. Why is there such suffering? Who can tell the difference between here and hell?"<sup>2</sup> The prisoners have nowhere to complain about their sufferings, nowhere to plead their grievances, but only live helplessly in a miserable world. In such a big scene, all the prisoners are played by actors of the dance team, not wearing tattered clothes, holding an iron rod or carrying a real rock, but a series of body performances, accompanied by somber music and backing vocals, backdropped by dim lighting and setting, are used to portray a group of poor souls living in a miserable world, touching the hearts of the audience with their deep sufferings. All these effects are presented through the virtual performance of the actors. Instead of pursuing lifelike details, the creators decided to present spiritual miserableness in a virtual form and present emotional realness through the use of opera imagism, striking a deep chord with the audience.

Space-time treatment in traditional Chinese opera is "employing the actors' virtual movements and explanatory lines to imply the

changes in space and time, on which opera artists have already established an agreement with the audience and gain great freedom in space-time by dint of this agreement.”<sup>3</sup> It is precisely by dint of this agreement with the audience that a lot of splendid moments are created by space-time treatment in traditional Chinese opera.

In the first scene of *Les Misérable*, Valjean is released from prison. He returns to the outside world after 19 years as a prisoner, with thunders and lightnings descending upon his head. All the way, he stumbles amid the glances; he is shunned and spurned because he used to be a prisoner for stealing a loaf of bread for a starving child. “No one answers a knock on the door; no one pities a beggar. Coldshoulders everywhere; a cold heart here.”<sup>4</sup> Valjean is forced to stay in a dog’s kennel, but even the dog drives him out, so he storms into a house and the kind-hearted bishop Myriel takes him in, leading him onto a sunlit path ever after.

The dancers play a pivotal role in this scene. When Valjean comes on stage, two groups of extras, sixteen in all, enter from behind the entrance and the exit, forming a semicircle on the stage. When Valjean begs for shelter, they all turn their backs on him as he approaches each of them: no one wants to be with an ex-prisoner and no one wants to show the slightest mercy. At this time, the extras form a new semicircle, showing their backs to the audience, excluding Valjean from the crowd. When Valjean tries to explain, the crowd forms a circle again around him, accusing him with words: “A victim of his own crime deserves no pity; you shall bear crime and hard labor for the rest of your life”. Valjean breaks out and resorts to the dog’s kennel. The crowd then forms a door in a chorus of “Danger, danger, fasten the latch”, and Valjean, kicked out by the dog, breaks open the door into the house of Bishop Myriel. In this series of smooth stage movements, the dancers show the audience all the changes and developments in space and time through a variety of formations and appearances in collaboration with Valjean’s performance. With a series of virtual movements and a few explanatory lines, the dancers switch roles between strangers from the streets, residents in the small town, and the door of the bishop’s house; stage space-time changes from a wild suburb to a cold town to a bishop’s warm house. The triple role switch of the dancers and the triple change of stage space-time take place in a few minutes, yet without causing any doubt in the audience. With the mind changing with the stage and moving with the actors, the audience is convinced by the triple roles of the dancers and the three “real” space-times. The Peking opera version of *Les Misérable* has presented imagistic stage space-times by dint of an agreement established by opera artists with the audience.

Such presumptive treatment is common in traditional Chinese opera, and the audience is also accustomed to this narrative mode. In many traditional operas, we often see a child still in infancy in the previous scene grow up into a handsome man in the next scene only through a few simple explanations. It is not surprising that Jean Valjean transforms from a hard laborer in the first scene to a benevolent mayor in the second scene. Such treatment spares the limited acting time for important events to be depicted and for the inner world to be expressed of the main characters in front of difficulties.

In the first two scenes of *Les Misérable*, the form of dance is extensively used and the dancers play a big role in switching stage space-time and rendering character emotions. The use of dancers is a continuation of the aesthetic spirit of traditional Chinese opera and an exploration of a new technique of stage performance. The dancers are the extras, the onlookers, the spokespeople for the scriptwriter and the director, and the inner voices of the main characters. Such multiple identities give the director more space for expression. When they are the extras, they enrich stage scenes and make stage setting more visually impactful; when they convey emotions for the scriptwriter and the director, the audience gains a more intuitive understanding of the theme and gist of the opera; when they become the inner voices of the main characters as well as the onlookers, the audience gets multiple perspectives of the inner world of the main characters, thus seeing a group of well-rounded characters.

In the next few scenes, especially the one with the sewers, the creators made use of the dance team to go deeper into stage performance space.

Marius is seriously wounded in the barricade battle and Valjean has to carry him through the centuries-old labyrinth of sewers of Paris. In the novel, Hugo describes at great length the sewers of Paris that run for sixty leagues (according to statistics in 1832), detailing the 10 centuries of history of the sewers, the complex structure of the sewers and the dangers lurking. Hugo notes that the stench from the sewers permeates the skies over Paris: “The air taken from above a dung-heap, as has been scientifically proved, is purer than the air taken from above Paris...”; “for ten centuries, the cess-pool has been the disease of Paris. The sewer is the blemish which Paris has in her blood.... The occupation of sewer men was formerly almost as perilous, and almost as repugnant to the people, as the occupation of knacker, which was so long held in horror and handed over to the executioner.”<sup>5</sup> It is under such appalling conditions that Valjean carries unconscious Marius. “As in the ocean, the diver may disappear there.”<sup>6</sup> The hardship of Valjean safely carrying Marius out of the sewers is hence conceivable.

In this scene, the creators devised a series of body movements to demonstrate the hardship of Valjean walking with Marius on his back and the shift of space in the sewers. Smooth, imagistic space-time treatment is accomplished through the various formations of dancers, with the full aid of “instantaneity”, a concept in the virtual space-time aesthetics of traditional Chinese opera.

After losing the barricade battle, Valjean, carrying wounded Marius on his back, traverses the stage from the exit to the entrance on the second-floor platform in the accompaniment of “Escape from the sieges and bullets, only to enter a pit of hell”. At this time, the long steps leading to downstage of the second-floor platform in the entrance have been moved onto the golden ratio point of the stage, and black-cloaked dancers come straight from the entrance to the golden ratio point, lining up at the bottom of the steps with their cloaks up and their faces to the audience. Valjean, carrying wounded Marius on his back, appears at the bottom of the steps, greeted by a path of light made by stage lighting. A sequence of arrangements gives the audience an image of entering the deepest part of the sewers. By the path of light, Valjean with Marius on his back makes his way to the exit through a series of body tricks, including back-to-back rolls, somersaults and spins. In stage treatment, we can see all these tricks are performed by Valjean carrying Marius. In the normal sense, unconscious Marius won’t be able to move, let alone to perform any trick. In this scene, however, the creators have already presented the audience with Valjean really carrying Marius, so all stage techniques are designed surrounding the specific movement of Valjean carrying or supporting Marius. When Valjean performs a spin with Marius on his back, it shows the

hardship of Valjean supporting unconscious Marius and trudging through the sewers; “spin” simply exaggerates and beautifies the movement of “support”. At this point, the audience is not only convinced that Marius is unconscious, but also fascinated by the beauty of stylized movements of opera, as a result of the sublimation of “carry” and “support” and the presentation of the art of life in stylized movements unique to traditional Chinese opera.

In the novel *Les Misérable*, there is a passage about Valjean walking through the sewers with Marius on his back:

The water came up to his arm-pits; he felt that he was sinking; it was only with difficulty that he could move in the depth of ooze which he had now reached. The density, which was his support, was also an obstacle. He still held Marius on high, and with an unheard-of expenditure of force, he advanced still; but he was sinking. He had only his head above the water now and his two arms holding up Marius. In the old paintings of the deluge there is a mother holding her child thus.<sup>77</sup>

What a touching sight! Valjean trudges on, carrying Marius through the perilous sewers like a mother holding her child. On the stage, there is no actual mud, water or sinuous sewers, all of which are performed by the actors. The dancers change their formation constantly to show the unpredictable sewers and the perilous mud and water. The actors playing Valjean and Marius employ a series of dance movements and techniques to show Valjean’s hard struggle with Marius on his back. Dividing, integrating or intersecting, the actors present to the audience a perfect image of struggle for survival through their rich body language, dance formations and stylized techniques. Valjean, with all his tenacity, at last emerges from the perilous, sinuous sewers. Valjean is bound to succeed for God cannot bear to have such a great soul annihilated in such a hellish corner.

The stench of water, the devouring quicksand, the twists and turns of the sewers, the trudge of Valjean.... All these are clearly presented before the audience by a series of arrangements and dances by the actors on a small stage. While we are gripped by Valjean’s fate, we are also amazed at the expressiveness of opera.

Opera “takes the limited space and time on stage as unfixed, free, flowing space and time. The stage is dead, but in the performance of opera, it is here if we say so; it is there if we say it is there.”<sup>78</sup> Based on this principle, the Peking opera version of *Les Misérables* has accomplished lots of delicate space-time treatment.

#### 4 Innovation in space-time treatment

In *A Historical Survey of Chinese Theatrical Culture*, Yu Qiuyu wrote a passage on the charm of Chinese theatrical culture:

The imagistic style of Chinese theatrical culture transcends the external realness to extract the essence and transcends the facial expression and appearance to reveal the deep emotion, thus exhibiting a unique unity in the forest of world theatrical culture: unity of spirit and form with an emphasis on spirit and unity of idea and conception with an emphasis on idea. Just as Qi Baishi’s paintings feature fish with water, Chinese plays feature spirit with form, idea with conception. Spirit and idea are like splendid clouds roaming over the skies, free and unrestrained, closely complemented by form and conception. Together, they drive the audience’s thoughts and emotions to ripple with them. This is where the core unique artistic charm of Chinese theatrical culture lies.<sup>9</sup>

Opera is a highly integrated art that “features spirit with form to unify spirit and form and features idea with conception to unify virtual and real”. Inheriting the aesthetic spirit of opera imagism and developing new methods of expression are the top priority for contemporary Chinese opera creators. Opera needs development and, more importantly, innovation. We must delve into the precious legacy left by the older generation of opera artists, and on the basis of extending the imagistic aesthetic of traditional Chinese opera, we must create new stage vocabulary and technology for contemporary and future audiences.

The stage of opera needs creation, which needs to be based upon understanding of the imagistic aesthetic principle, since art without creation is lifeless. In the foreword to *Stan Lai’s Creatology*, Yu Qiuyu wrote a passage about creativity:

A theatre without creativity is an exhausting quagmire to the eye and ear; works without creativity are a pile of familiar yet unapproachable cultural garbage; life without creativity is a series of repeated years made up of imitation, boredom and loss.<sup>10</sup>

For thousands of years, traditional Chinese opera has lived to this day through constant creation and innovation, which are the inner vitality of its existence. The imagistic aesthetic spirit of opera drives creators to constant creation; the rich stylized expression of opera offers creators a variety of means; the ethereal stage presentation principle of opera gives creators infinite possibilities. In opera, “the flexibility of space-time treatment allows opera to deftly render the limitation of stage into the extensivity of art...” The physical space of stage performance is finite, but the artistic space created on opera stage is infinite, so the finite stage space can bear the infinite expression and vitality of opera. This is like viewing a picture where the painted part is indescribably brilliant while the empty space is also magnificently conceived!

In the Peking opera version of *Les Misérables*, not only the quintessence of Hugo’s original novel is retained, but the essential aesthetic spirit of Chinese opera also runs throughout the play. While characters with Western features sing traditional Chinese Peking opera, a new unique stylized acting mode is also established. In the process of appreciating the beauty of traditional Peking opera, the audience can also be inspired by the plot and characters of the original novel. In this adaptation, Chinese opera and Western literature resonate harmoniously to generate a wonderful melody; Eastern and Western cultures collide, blend and complement each other. This is an important exploration for adapting and transplanting Western classics into traditional Chinese opera.

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