

The Theatres in Modern Shanghai: From the Perspective of Cultural History¹

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The heart of this thesis is a theatre with more than 150 years of history and tradition in Shanghai, China. The Lyceum Theatre (Chinese name: Lanxin Daxiyuan 蘭心大戲院) was known as the "Western Arts Hall of Fame" in Shanghai until the end of World War II. There is the special situation of Shanghai behind this, which has evolved as a western concession; at the same time, however, it has something in common with the modernization of theatres found throughout Asia. From 2010 to 2016, I participated in research specifically for the Lyceum Theatre in the KAKENHI Joint Research Group². What I report here is part of that research.

1. China Modernization and Shanghai Settlement

Before introducing the Lyceum Theatre, let us review where Shanghai is. Shanghai is located where the Yangtze River (揚子江) pours into the sea and had favorable conditions for trade, making it a base for European and American powers and Japan to enter the continent. The British won the Opium War in 1842 and attained the Qing Dynasty, opening five ports, including Shanghai, and colonizing Hong Kong. China's modernity began with this external pressure, and the settlements set up in Shanghai developed

¹ This article is related to my Japanese-language essay,: Enomoto 2018.

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as a special area beyond China's sovereignty. By the end of the 19th century, Shanghai had the International Settlement, run mainly by the British; the city also had the French Concession, managed by the French government, where Chinese as well as foreigners could live. Until the end of World War II, Shanghai flourished as an international city with people of different ethnicities and nationalities.

Regarding politics, earlier Shanghai was a land dominated by imperial powers in the background of armed forces. However, regarding cultural history, it was a place where a unique modern culture combining the West and East had been born. Foreign culture first came to Shanghai, was given a Chinese character by the people of Shanghai, and then spread throughout China. It is no exaggeration to say that the history of modern Chinese music, dance, drama, and movies all began in Shanghai.

2. Lyceum Theatre History

Next, let us discuss the history of the Lyceum Theatre.

The Lyceum Theatre was built in 1866 as a dedicated theatre for the British Amateur Dramatic Club. While working in the opium and tea trades, British living in Shanghai rehearsed plays, practiced music in their spare time, and held recitals. During a time when foreign residents were few and entertainment was scarce, it was a valuable pleasure to play by themselves and watch one another's performances with friends. They built the theatre because they wanted a place for continuous recreational activities, and building a Western-style theatre signified confirmation of their Western identity. Lyceum Theatre bears the same name as the theatre in London; in Shanghai, there was a desire to match London's artistry.

A fire destroyed and forced the Lyceum Theatre, to relocate in 1874, and the second generation was built. In 1931, the third generation relocated to the Shanghai French Concession. You can still see it on Maoming South Road (茂名南路) in central Shanghai. The third generation has a medium capacity of 723 people and is a theatre designed for drama, but it was also used as a venue for performances of opera companies and artists from Europe with the development of concessions and entertainment commercialization. Since

1934, it has also been the venue for regular concerts of the Shanghai Municipal Orchestra.³

During the Russian Revolution, Shanghai had become home to a number of White Russian artists who fled the revolution. The Russian upper class could speak French, so the French Concession in Shanghai seemed a convenient place to live. The Russians also performed operas and ballets while reminiscing about their homeland, and the Lyceum Theatre became known as a stage for Russian art.

In the late 1930s, Jewish refugees who fled Nazi Germany also settled in Shanghai, and artists who were active in Vienna and elsewhere appeared at the Lyceum Theatre. Shanghai was a valuable place in the world, offering these refugees a space to continue their artistic activities.⁴

A distinctive feature of the Lyceum Theatre was that Westerners living in Shanghai operated it to maintain their culture. Most people on the stage were Westerners, as were majority of the audiences. However, since the 1930s, the social status of Chinese people has improved, and intellectuals and wealthy people who had returned home after studying in Europe and the United States gradually started coming to the theatre. In other words, as the times passed, the Lyceum Theatre began to play an enlightening role in expressing to the Chinese what Western art was. It seems difficult to understand drama because of language restrictions, but music and dance had the advantage of being easily transmitted to people of any country.

The Lyceum Theatre was also a special place for the Japanese. In Japan, the Shanghai boom began in the 1920s, propelling Shanghai as a popular place to experience Western culture and customs without going to Europe. Famous writers, such as AKUTAGAWA Ryûnosuke, visited Shanghai one after another and published travelogues. Western arts such as orchestras and ballets were regularly performed, and their blending into citizens' daily lives more than that in Tokyo provided Japanese artists with much to study.

When the Pacific War began in 1941, Japanese troops were stationed in the Shanghai International Settlement, expelling the British and Americans. As the Japanese took over the management of the Lyceum Theatre, Japanese artists experienced increased stage time. ASAHIKA Takashi, who later became a global conductor, also experienced a high level of performance by Rus-

3 For the history of the Shanghai Municipal Orchestra, see Enomoto 2006.

4 For more information on the characteristics and realities of the Shanghai music world, see Iguchi 2019.

sian artists for the first time, as a guest at a regular concert of the Shanghai Philharmonic Orchestra (former Shanghai Municipal Orchestra). In addition, Komaki Masahide—the only Japanese member of the Russian ballet company, Ballet Russe, at the time—took many performances from Shanghai back to Japan after the war, contributing to the development of ballet in Japan⁵.

3 The Role of Western Theatre in Asia

Shanghai is different from other cities in China in that it has developed rapidly with foreign investment since the mid-19th century. Foreigners also made buildings that serve as urban infrastructure and landmarks during the settlement era. At the time, the British believed Shanghai lacked cultural facilities and buildings. In the 20th century, however, the land prices in central Shanghai were quite high and the population was overcrowded, preventing the construction of new, large buildings such as opera houses. Incidentally, France built several opera houses in Indochina, which was their colony, but the Shanghai French Concession had no official cultural facilities other than a few schools and clubs.

In the 1930s, Shanghai was the sixth largest city in the world with a population of over 3 million, but there was no other theatre specializing in Western performing arts as the Lyceum Theatre was. There were only large and small theatres that presented traditional plays. In the late 1940s, there were 128 theatres in Shanghai, 40 of which were also used as cinemas, and 81 were dedicated to Chinese traditional drama (Wang 2008). A well-known example is Theatre Grand (Chinese name: Daguangming Daxiyuan 大光明大戲院). This was the finest cinema presenting Hollywood movies and was sometimes used for orchestra performances. However, regarding sound effects, it seems that it was not suitable for non-movie use.

The growth of new entertainment such as movies, music, and drama performances at the Lyceum Theatre struggled to attract audiences. However, the reason the theatre had maintained despite lower profits was its symbolic implications for foreign residents as a hall of Western art.

In fact, theatres with similar functions were built in other colonies and settlements in Asia. In 1870, for example, a British-led amateur dramatic

⁵ See Enomoto (2015) on the relationship between the Japanese and the Lyceum Theatre.

group created the Gaiety Theatre, which existed in the Yokohama settlement in Japan. Initially, most of the British who came to Yokohama immediately after the opening of the port were traditionally trading in Shanghai, so they worked in the same way as they did in Shanghai—created communities and performed leisure activities such as drama. The Gaiety Theatre was relocated in 1885, and the second generation was constructed. Shakespeare dramas and other works presented there influenced Japanese writers and artists. However, it was destroyed by a fire during the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 and was never rebuilt.

Regarding the UK base in Asia, Hong Kong cannot be forgotten. Hong Kong developed as a British colony after the Opium War and had more residents than Shanghai at the end of the 19th century. Jardine Matheson & Co., which had made significant profits in the opium trade, donated to build City Hall, inside of which was a large theatre called Theatre Royal. There is also a music hall called St. Andrews Hall (Nakamura 1993: 646). These were opened in 1869, approximately at the same time as the first Lyceum Theatre in Shanghai and the Gaiety Theatre in Yokohama. The Suez Canal was opened in 1869, and the route has been significantly shortened since then, with more artists visiting Asia from Europe. Not only performers, but also opera companies, circus companies, etc., have been traveling around Asia for a long time.

In the past, research on how Western music was accepted in Asia has traditionally been regarded as a modernization problem of Japan and China. The late Nakamura, Rihei was the first to break down the narrow framework, and he vigorously investigated materials such as English newspapers and official documents in various parts of Asia, highlighting that there was a music market connected to East Asia by sea route at the end of the 19th century.

I followed Nakamura's approach to English newspaper, *The North China Herald*—published in Shanghai—and examined music concert ads and reviews. The results showed that the number of concerts in Shanghai began to increase significantly in 1874, in line with the opening of the second-generation Lyceum Theatre. In other words, if there is a good theatre with the potential for box office revenue, more Westerners will consider incorporating Shanghai into a performance tour. The existence of the theatre attracted European artists to Asia.

According to Nakamura's research, in addition to Shanghai and Hong Kong, there was also the Town Hall in Singapore, Gymnasium Theatre in Kobe, and Public Hall in Nagasaki (*ibid.*). All of these facilities were originally creat-

ed for residents' recreational activities but were also gradually rented out for the outside artists' performances.

Let us compare Nakamura's research with previous research on Yokohama Gaiety Theatre and examine specific examples. The first Gaiety Theatre in Yokohama was overly small and the facilities were not high quality. However, thanks to the construction of the second generation in 1885, two opera companies came to Japan that year. The first was the Mascot Opera Company, which toured Singapore → Hong Kong → Shanghai → Kobe → Yokohama → Hong Kong → Shanghai with multiple performances in Yokohama from August 25 to September 19. The works of popular operetta composers in Europe, including Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Pirates of Penzance: The Slave of Duty* and *Patience: / Bunthorne's Bride* as well as Lecock's *La Fille de Madame Angot*, were performed (Nakamura 1993: 652; Masumoto 1986: 218-219).

The second, Emelie Melville Opera Company, toured Hong Kong → Shanghai → Kobe → Yokohama → Kobe, with several performances in Yokohama from November 10 to 27. Bizet's *Carmen* was brought to the head of the series (ibid.). It was also a characteristic of the time that performances were performed again as the company traveled back home. As each region's reputation rose, the return journey would have become increasingly popular as "Triumphal Performances."

Guillaume Sauvlet, a Dutch pianist living in Shanghai who visited Japan with Mascot Opera Company, served not only as a piano accompanist for the opera company but also held several solo concerts at the Yokohama Gaiety Theatre. Eventually, he separated from the opera company and settled in Japan. In 1886, he was expected his ability and became a foreign teacher at Ongaku Torishirabe-gakari, Japan's first music education institution.

Foreign teachers have played a major role in modernizing music education in both Japan and China. However, researchers had little interest in where and how the foreign teachers originated, and it was unknown that foreigners came and went between Shanghai and Yokohama. From a Western perspective, both Shanghai and Yokohama were two of the many cities in East Asia, perhaps only chosen by settlers for their valuable jobs. In the future, research will be needed not only from the perspective of accepting Western music in Asia, but also from the perspective of global movement and flow of Western music.

4. Localization of Western Theatre Culture

Lastly, let us discuss the specialty of Shanghai and the theatre culture that was born there.

Shanghai was an Asian terminal where multiple sea routes intersected, and there was the International Settlement—an area that remained politically neutral without belonging to any state. Thanks to this, people, goods, and money came and went freely from a wide area of Europe, the United States, and Asia, and the city was full of various cultures. It can be said that the Chinese in Shanghai took full advantage of these geographical conditions and chose what they needed to form their own culture.

In the history of Chinese music and performing arts, folk songs and play music rooted in local cultures were at the center, and traditional local drama *difangxi* (地方戲), such as Peking Opera, was the most familiar entertainment for ordinary people. The traditional theatre was called *chayuan* (茶園), and tables were arranged between seats to watch the play while drinking tea. However, in 1908, “*Xinwutai* (新舞台)—constructed in *Shiliupu* (十六舖), Shanghai—was the first modern theatre to remove all tables. According to Chen Linghong (陳凌虹)'s research (Chen 2014, Chapter 4, Section 2), *Xinwutai* was not a square stage supported by conventional pillars, but rather had a half-moon-shaped front with the pillars removed. In addition, it is said that it was possible to have snowflakes (confetti) fall from the rafters and running water on the stage, as well as a rotating stage, background writing, and props. The three-story building had a large capacity of 2,000 people, abolishing the conventional system where tea and theatre fees were not distinguished and succeeded in introducing a ticketing system.

Many Chinese students had studied modernization measures in Japan since the beginning of the 20th century, and the construction of the new stage was influenced by Japanese theatres. In Japan, Western theatres—which were similar to the European opera houses—were expected by the European policy at the end of the 19th century. *Shintomiza*, with gas lamps and chair seats, and *Yurakuza*, the base for new plays, have been constructed in succession. Chinese students experienced Western-style theatres and modern drama in Tokyo and started working on modern drama performances of their own. The first theatre group *Chunliushe* (春柳社) in modern China was formed in Tokyo.

The intellectuals who returned from studying abroad, and those who were influenced by them, also participated in modern drama in Shanghai. In 1908,

a group called Chunyangshe (春陽社) held a performance at the second-generation Lyceum Theatre. According to Xu Banmei (徐半梅), who played an active part in the theatrical scene at the time, the sound effects of the Lyceum Theatre were excellent, and whispering dialogue on the stage reached the third floor.⁶ Many actors would love the excellent facilities at the Lyceum Theatre, but the Chinese troupe could not perform regularly, likely because of the high rents.

The Chinese entered the Lyceum Theatre numerous times after the Japanese army ruled Shanghai in the 1940s during the Pacific War. Because of the expulsion of the British and Americans, fewer people used the theatre, and the Japanese side of the theatre managed to lend to a Chinese troupe to make money. Since 1942, the Lyceum Theatre had been active in contemporary plays and original plays based on history, some of which had been a huge hit because of the hidden anti-Japanese message.⁷ In sum, the drama performed by Westerners at the Lyceum Theatre did not affect the Chinese concerning content, but the existence of the Lyceum Theatre itself helped the development of modern Chinese drama.

It is rare for a study in Shanghai to focus on a single theatre, and our research group included not only English and Chinese newspapers, but also French and Russian newspapers. As the foreign language newspapers in the settlement era have been digitized in places such as the Shanghai Library, it is easy to collect information on specific theatres and performances in various languages for future research. If it is connected to not only Shanghai but also cities such as Hong Kong, Yokohama, and Singapore, it will become clear that the works and performances were transmitted as artists moved. Research on the acceptance, diffusion, and localization of Western art in Asia will must be understood as dynamism of the entire region, regardless of borders.

6 Xu 1957, p. 4.

7 Seto 2015. The performance at that time was detailed by Shao 2012. In addition, see Zhao Yi “*LanxinDaxiyuan shangyan yanmu yilanbiao(1941-1945)*”, Ohashi, Zhao, Enomoto and Iguchi ed. 2015, pp.243-294.

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