

Performance Spaces in Ancient Chinese Cities: Street Theatres of the 9th Century Capital Chang'an¹

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Introduction

This article aims to analyze the composition and structure of street theaters in Chang'an, the capital of the Tang Dynasty in the early 9th century, mainly based on the novel *The Tale of Li Wa* (李娃伝). *The Tale of Li Wa* is a love story written by Bai Xingjian, a scholar-official; however, it was adapted from a street play performed by wandering entertainers in Chang'an (Seo 1987b: 476-505). *The Tale of Li Wa*, the novel version of the street drama, was edited into Taiping Guangji, volume 484 published at the end of 10th century. I want to look at the street performance and theatrical presentation born in Chang'an in the 9th century through the lens of *The Tale of Li Wa*.

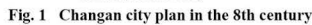
Behind the birth of this street love drama is the social transformation of the capital in the 9th century. Chinese society was encouraged by urbanization's progress and promoted the penetration of the monetary economy, the expansion of the commercial scale, and the complication of commercial organizations between the 9th and 12th centuries (Seo 2019a: 126-143). As a result, it increased the distribution density of human resources and materials nationwide, and promoted the common people's remarkable rise, mainly in cities. A unique urban popular culture began to develop in major cities in the Tang dynasty. Chang'an grew into a large city with about 700,000 people in the 8th and 9th centuries, becoming one of the world's largest cities at that time (Seo 2019c: 96-163).

1 This chapter is newly written based on the following previously published articles by Seo (1987b; 2003; 2019a; 2019b; 2019c; 2020).

Chang'an laid the foundation for national rituals and bureaucracy as the emperor's political capital and his officials. It was also a city where ancient traditional ideas intersected with the latest academic and literary trends. The new culture such as fashion, food, and music from Western countries, quickly became popular (Picken 1981-2000). Huge palaces and elaborately designed mansions of officials and merchants lined up, and it was also the center of art, where high-quality crafts, paintings, and books, including printed products, were produced (Seo 2004: 1-42). Chang'an was an international cultural city with a variety of religious faiths, including Buddhism, Taoism, Manichaeism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism (Seo: 2019b: 1-20).

At the same time, Chang'an had a huge non-bureaucratic population and accumulated commercial wealth as a capital city. It was a city of daily encounters between people of different origins and classes. Various folk performing arts, including street performances, have been developed since the 8th century (Ditter 2011: 62-83; Shields 2014: 107-131).

Such cultural development in Chang'an is also related to the transformation of the urban social structure. Chang'an's traditional city plan was divided into symmetrical residential zones, as shown in Figure 1 (Seo 2020: 182-228). With the Daming Palace's construction in northeastern Chang'an in 663, and the new Xingqing Palace's in the eastern part in 714, the well-proportioned city plan had begun to crumble by the 8th century. As the city population and commerce activation expanded along the traffic trunk line, running east and west through the capital, the bureaucratic district formed on the hillside in the east of the city, and the common people's district formed in the western lowland areas (Seo 1987a: 159-200). The East City and its surrounding area, located in the center of the bureaucracy district, formed the city center of Chang'an by accumulating information and financial institutions. This area is the place where delicate and gorgeous crafts and sophisticated literary works could be produced. On the other hand, the popular culture was developed with the formation of the foreigners' quarter, merchants' district, slums, and settlements for people belonging to the lower hierarchy in the western city. The functional differentiation of settlements progressed in the 9th century, as shown in Figure 2 (Seo 2019c: 167-269).



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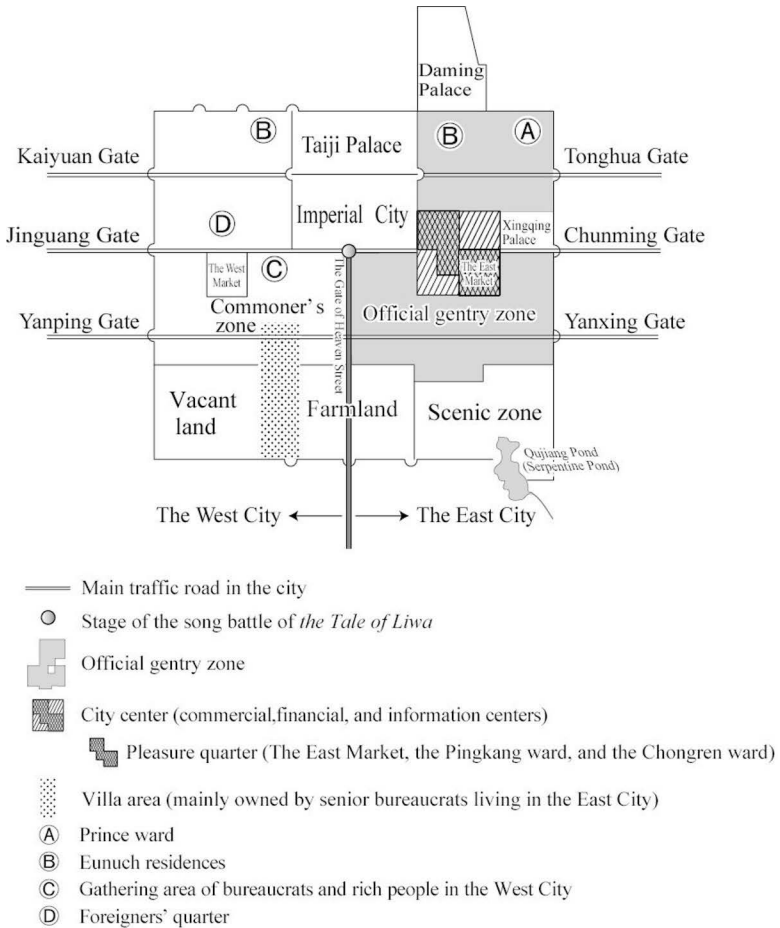


Fig. 2 Functional differentiation of Changan in the 9th century

Source: Seo (2019c : 240)

1. Street Theatres in Chang'an in the 9th Century: Focusing on the Drama of The Tale of Li Wa

The Tale of Li Wa was written in the literary language by a scholar-official in the 9th century. The story was based on a musical drama performed by entertainers in the mansion in the East City of Chang'an. It was changed into a didactic story based on the scholar-official's Confucian values and differs from the composition and structure of the play when performed on a street corner (Nienhauser 2007: 91-110). It seems possible to explore the actual situation of street drama using the novelization of Li Wa's Tale as a clue.

When you read *The Tale of Li Wa*, you will notice that the names of Chang'an's street corners and walled wards appear frequently. The place names are closely connected with the story structure (Seo 1987b 476-505; Tang 2010: 113-138; Feng 2011a: 27-44). The story is designed for people who are familiar with the urban space of Chang'an. This may be related to the fact that this novel is based on a street drama that was actually performed on the streets of Chang'an. Fig. 3 shows the spaces and stages that appear in *The Tale of Li Wa*. The contents of the novel are summarized as follows (Seo 1987b 477-479; Dudbridge 1983: 104-186).

During the Tianbao reign (742-756) of the Tang Emperor Xuanzong (685-762), a prestigious son of a local official in the Lower Yangzi Delta went to Chang'an, the capital of the Tang dynasty, to take the civil examination. He stayed at an inn in the Buzheng ward (Fig.3 C4) in the West City. One day, he went to the East Market in the East City, and on the way back, entered the east gate of the Pingkang ward (H5). While traveling to visit his friends on the corner of the southwest part of the ward, he saw a beautiful courtesan, Li Wa, when he traveled through Mingke (Jingling Harness) Lane. He fell in love at first sight and returned to the inn in the Buzheng ward. His friends said that she was one of Chang'an's most reputed courtesans. He visited Li Wa's home with a large amount of money, and he greeted Li Wa's foster mother and began to live with her.

Li Wa and he lived happily, but the foster mother began telling Li Wa to leave when his money was exhausted as it slowly dwindled day-to-day. One day he and Li Wa decided to pray to the god of childbirth for a child to be born. On their way home, Li Wa abandoned him at the mansion of Li Wa's aunt near the north gate of the Xuanyang ward (H6), and no matter how much he looked for Li Wa, he was unable to find her due to the elaborate "house-moving trick" of Li Wa's foster mother and aunt. He was exhausted and returned to

his former inn in the Buzheng ward in the West City. He was sick with grief, and the owner of the inn, who took care of him initially, finally left him at a funeral parlor in the West City. However, his illness healed with the help and support of the people at the funeral parlor. The man learned funeral elegies and became the best singer in the city.

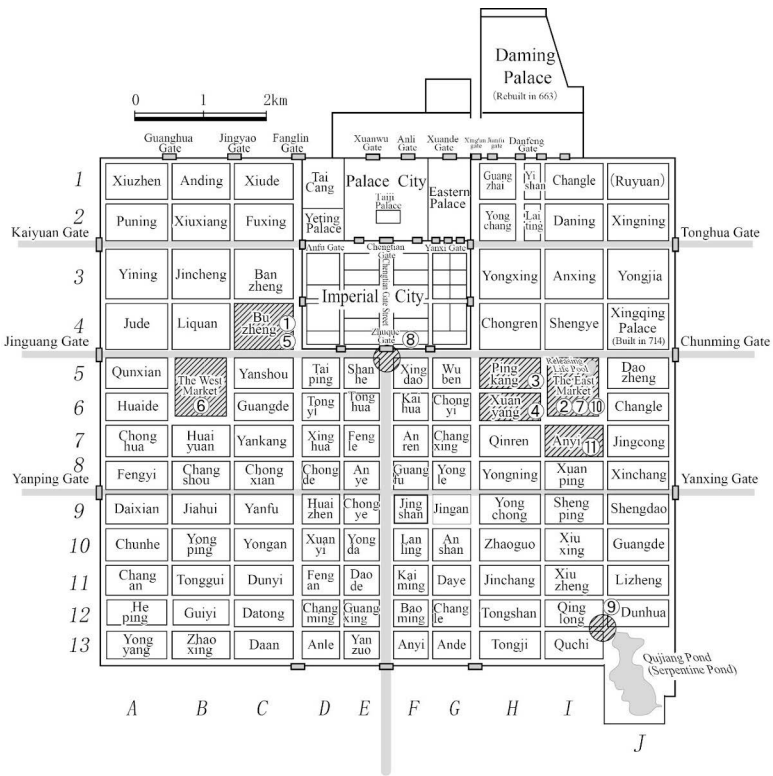


Fig. 3 Spaces and stages that appear in the Tale of Li Wa

①-⑪ shows stages of the Tale of Li Wa

Source: Seo (1987b : 478)

At the time, funeral parlors in the East and West Markets of Chang'an had ceremonial competitions. The funeral accessories and carriages of the East Market were superior to the West Market, but they were inferior in funeral elegies. Therefore, the master of the funeral parlor in the East Market secretly hired him away from the West Market funeral parlor with 20,000 in cash. The competition between the two parlors took place on the Gate of Heaven Street, located between the west and the east cities, and the loser would pay for all the costs of the food and drink for the banquet after the competition. A large crowd gathered from across Chang'an to see the exhibitions and song competitions of the funeral parlors. Before the eyes of a large crowd gathered from all around Chang'an, the funeral parlor in the East Market won the singing battle because of his talent for singing lamentations.

However, his father, who had happened to come to the capital, was among the audience. When father and son met face to face, the father was angry that he had abandoned his original purpose of passing the civil examination and brought disgrace upon his family name. He took his son around the Qujiang Pond (the Serpentine Pond) and the Apricot Orchard, located in the southeast part of Chang'an, beat him with a horsewhip, and left him for dead. Friends from the funeral parlor in the east who had followed him attempted to bury his body but found that he was breathing faintly. They brought him back to the funeral parlor, but he did not recover sufficiently and was eventually abandoned.

He dragged his purulent body and became a beggar walking around the East Market and the East City's residential area. On a snowy day, in front of a house in the Anyi ward (I7), he was nearly dead because of cold and hunger. Unexpectedly, however, the house was the one Li Wa lived in with her foster mother. Hearing the voice begging in the street, Li Wa recognized him, ran outside, and embraced him, wrapping him in a cotton garment. The two rented a new house in the northern corner of the Anyi ward (I7) and began to live together again. He passed the civil examination with top marks and subsequently passed the Plain Speech and Extreme Criticism examination and Li Wa's help. He was appointed administrator in Chengdu's higher prefecture, where he reunited with his father, who was Prefect of Chengdu. The father allowed his son to marry Li Wa. Their children are all said to have become high-ranking government officials. As summarized above, the story development of *The Tale of Li Wa* is closely linked to the urban space of Chang'an. This story is set across the entire city of Chang'an and embraces people of all social classes living in the capital (Seo 1987b: 476-505). Let's look back on the story,

paying attention to the relationship between urban space and the story's development as follows (see Fig.4).

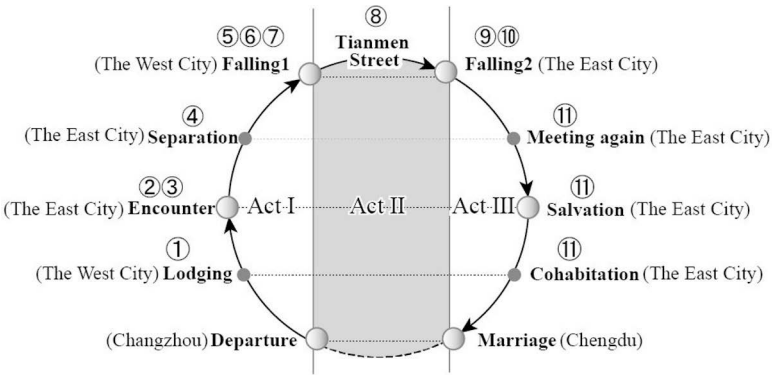


Fig.4 Structure of the Tale of Li Wa

① – ⑪ Story stages in Fig.3
Source: Seo (1987b : 483)

Firstly, the wealthy male embarks on a journey to the capital of Chang'an from Changzhou, located in the Yanzi Delta, which was developing at the time (**Departure**). He stays in the prosperous Buzheng ward (C4) in the West City of Chang'an (**Lodging**). Buzheng ward (C4) was the southwestern portion of the huge Imperial City, symbolizing the capital's political power, and was the northeastern part of the West City. This was a prime location in the West City along the main routes that extended outside the capital and was in a privileged living environment with culverts running north and south. This ward was also a foreign settlement. There was a Zoroastrian temple in the southwest corner of the ward. Using Buzheng ward as the stage for the introductory part of the story is intended to impress the reader because the male has entered the urban world of the imperial capital Chang'an, one of the biggest cities of the 9th century.

Secondly, the male goes to the East Market and meets Li Wa in Mingke Lane of Pingkang ward (H5). The house of Li Wa on the corner of the narrow lane is elegantly decorated. Her house has a gorgeous guesthouse and a pretty west hall with a bedroom. The tea sets and drinking vessels used for en-

tainment, the bedroom, curtains, and furnishings set up in the west hall, the dressing table and candles on the side of the bed, and the delicious food served by candlelight — these all imply the atmosphere of a polished culture that exists in this corner of town. A bewitching beauty, Li Wa, is at the center of the house. In other words, the movement from the inn of the West City to the East City is the move to the refined, brilliant, and sophisticated urban center. The appearance of a courtesan, Li Wa, who symbolizes the charm of the land, initiates the beginning of the story (**Encounter**).

The story begins in the East City, and the place and the behavior of the male protagonist evolve, as shown in Figure 3. However, the man, who had run out of money and been deceived and abandoned by Li Wa, was expelled from the society in the East City (**Separation**) and simultaneously thrown into the West City's lower society (**Fall 1**). Following this, the man escapes from this state of asphyxia with the help of friends from the funeral parlor. While working at funeral ceremonies in the vigorous and chaotic West City, through his education and talent acquired in his childhood, he is reborn as the best elegy singer in the capital.

After being poached by the East Market's funeral parlor, he enters the singing contest of the Gate of Heaven Street (Tianmen Street), the turning point of the story (**Gate of Heaven Street**). This is when the story turns back in the second half, and his father beats him near the Serpentine Pond (Qu-jiang Pond). Then, after becoming a beggar because of a fall worse than the first (Fall 2), he reunites with Li Wa (**Meeting again**) and is eventually revived as a member of the literary society in the East City when he passes the civil examination (**Salvation**). The locations of the encounter and salvation are in the same East City. However, contrary to the male's gestures and costumes that blend with the prime and bureaucratic areas of the East City in the scene of encounter, the man with the purulent body, whose temporary dwelling is a place for human and livestock dung, is forced to wander around the glamorous East Market and the bureaucratic mansion while begging until he reunites with Li Wa. The man's misery is evident; this is his condition when Li Wa runs up to him and covers him in her cotton garment. His hunger and cold finally abate, and the end of this long, rugged story is revealed (**Cohabitation**).

As mentioned above, at the starting point and turning point of the story, the actual names of the wards and the streets of Chang'an appear, providing a sense of realism. Also, because of Chang'an's urban spaces' functional differentiation in the latter half of the Tang dynasty, a specific place name evokes a specific image, making the wards and streets evocative settings for the story.

Additionally, the change of the ward name corresponds to the change of the storyline. In many cases, the choice of the ward as the stage must be deeply tied to the characters' gestures and conversations, the residence, furniture, costumes, and the like.

Such an arrangement, in which the street corners of Chang'an frequently appear and the street corner setting prepares the story's development, closely relates to the fact that a storyteller originally played the story on the streets of Chang'an. In other words, it is said that *The Tale of Li Wa*, based on a folk love drama, was written by a scholar-official, who passed the civil examination in 807, and was much too long to be told and played in one night. There are various theories about when it was documented, but they agree that it was written in the early 9th century (Seo 1987b: 482). In other words, *The Tale of Li Wa* is a work that officials transcribed in Chinese writing based on the long-form oral story played by a storyteller on the street corners of Chang'an in the early 9th century.

It was inevitable that values based on Confucianism, which cultured persons at the time shared, came to the forefront when the writers recorded the story. For this reason, the work seems to have been given specific meaning by the Confucian moral view of the officials, who honor Li Wa as a remarkable woman and a wise wife. The story's main subject is Li Wa and her ethical behavior, reflected in the title, *The Tale of Li Wa*. Furthermore, at the beginning, as well as the end, of *The Tale of Li Wa*, the author notes significantly that, despite her status as a prostitute, there are rare and modern ways of doing so. The emphasis is on the man's success thanks to Li Wa's mental and material help, and his entering the civil society at the time (Seo 2003: 695-722; Tsai 2004: 99-127; Feng 2015; Luo 2015).

Although the story's narrative origin is not evident in the existing text, it was first spoken and played among the people on the street. Today's written text contains the same values as the clerk who wrote it, is an extremely compressed version of the spoken content, and suffers technical problems of writing colloquial words mixed with songs. Moreover, it is thought that the emphasis was different in many ways. The main characters in the narrative story were a female heroine and a male hero. In other words, as can be seen from *The Tale of Li Wa* and the previously-cited summaries of the text, along with the richly groomed and honored woman, the former courtesan Li Wa, the male protagonist, traverses social environments quite different from Chang'an's streets. His status declines from being an elite officer candidate,

who was expected to pass the civil examination to a beggar on the roadside and is eventually rescued by a woman.

The Tale of Li Wa is a story of a wandering holy aristocrat, with a plot structure that many stories have in common. Namely, the hero's departure → 1. a fateful encounter → 2. fall of the hero → 3. salvation by the female protagonist → 4. marriage. It is based on a popular motif of wanderers' salvation thanks to the pure love of a girl (Hashimoto 1983: 471-484; Seo 1987b: 476-505). Also, *The Tale of Li Wa* features the "hero's journey" trope, involving a hero who encounters various trials while wandering and traveling through different worlds. The first and second halves of the story are overturned, and as the themes of the first half of the story are denied and opposed, the second half of the narrative is completed. That is, as shown in Fig. 4 on the left, the hero's departure and marriage, the encounter with the female protagonist, and the salvation by her are paired. Additionally, in the scene with the song competition in the Gate of Heaven Street, sandwiched between two falls, the story is divided into the first and second halves, and in the latter half, the wandering circle is closed in bliss in the reverse order of the first half.

For example, although the hero's two falls before and after the Gate of Heaven Street scene seem to be the same concerning the darkness of the situation, they correspond strictly in composition and are in opposition. The story's settings change from the West City society to the East City society. The person who triggers the protagonist's fall changes from Li Wa's aunt to the protagonist's father. The character who watches the protagonist's suspended state initially and his abandonment at the end changes from the innkeeper in the Buzheng ward (C4) in the West City to the protagonist's former friends at the funeral parlor in the East City. After escaping his state of asphyxia, the protagonist changes in one instance from a civil examination candidate to a premiere funeral singer of the capital, and in the next from a singer to a beggar of the residential district of the East City. Finally, his rescuer, who allows his rebirth, changes from the funeral parlor's friends to Li Wa herself. In each case, the fall becomes more severe, and thus the final relief by Li Wa is designed to be more dramatic and significant.

2. Street Theatres in Chang'an

A festival in the Gate of Heaven Street exists as a bridge between those conflicting situations, and the scene in the Gate of Heaven Street is the turning

point in the whole story, as shown in Figure 4. As an important factor that established the development of motifs in society at the time, the wards and streets of Chang'an are used. The story evolves along with the protagonist's tour of the urban space of Chang'an. Therefore, by analyzing the scenes of Chang'an as costumes that cover motifs, it is possible to discover in reverse the differences and characteristics of the motifs themselves in a particular era or region. Correlated with them, this will offer some clues to the emergence of an early Chang'an urban society.

In the 9th century, people watched various folk performing arts on the street of Chang'an. For example, in the precincts and gates of Cien Temple (H11), Qinglong Temple (J8), Jianfu Temple (F6), and Yongshou Temple (G8), there were permanent playgrounds crowded with spectacle huts where thousands could gather. In addition to the limited theaters, performances presented on the street could be seen in various places in the city. From the end of the 7th century to the beginning of the 8th century, religious music was performed on temporary stages in the streets and markets of Chang'an until dawn, and there was a report to the throne that prohibited performing music in the streets and markets in 843. Although it was not a street performance, in the early 8th century in the Liqian ward (B4), Westerners from Central Asia were seen dancing in the city's streets. There is a story of a father and daughter who walked and begged on the East City street corner, while the daughter sang a song with her father. The General of the Zhaoguo ward (H10) heard the song and her beautiful voice echoing on the street, eventually making her a concubine during the Dali year (776-79).

From the 8th and 9th centuries, folk music was introduced to rural areas by traveling entertainers, and some monks traveled around the provinces and told Buddhist tales and female actors walked and performed Buddhist drama. It is said that the origin of the folk drama, Buddhist narrative, comes from the practice of explaining Buddhism using pictures by popular artists. Since the middle of the Tang, folk poetry and songs, which had been actively conducted at each temple in Chang'an, had further advanced techniques such as Buddhist pictorial scrolls and storytelling. Folk poetry and songs, which were popular in civil society, were eventually sublimated by literati's sophisticated writings, creating new genres in the late Tang literature (Edwards 1938; Campany 2015; Mair 1997; Mair 1983).

It is thought that the storytelling that became the basis of the novel *The Tale of Li Wa* was formed during the process of popularization of prevalent performing arts since the mid-Tang. It is suggestive that, as a storytelling

form, sutra-based ballads accompanied by music in medieval Japan were played by wandering groups, who are thought to have been low-ranking people who traveled across the land. Perhaps, even in Chang'an, such entertainment groups sang on street corners, competing with each other in skill and polishing their art on the playgrounds inside the temple precincts and on the streets. These were probably manifested in the prototype of *The Tale of Li Wa*. You can get a glimpse of the flow of the popular culture that matured in the Chang'an cityscape of the late Tang in the Gate of Heaven Street scene, where the protagonist was in between his falls, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1a: Comparison of the Song Battle of the Gate of Heaven Street

	Organizer	
Contrast points	Funeral parlor of the West Market	Funeral parlor of the East Market
Funeral equipment	Carriages and hearses are inferior to those of the East City.	Everyone is clean with nearly no enemy.
Stage equipment	Layer couch	Consecutive couch
Place	South corner	North corner
Singer appearance	A long-bearded man	Black turban boy
Singer props	Hold a bell and proceed	Come with a large wooden fan
Supporting role	Escort several people	Several people in the left and the right
Song of the funeral elegy	Song of the White Horse	Song of the Dew on the shallots

Table 1b: Comparison of the Song Battle of the Gate of Heaven Street

	Organizer	
Contrast points	Funeral parlor of the West Market	Funeral parlor of the East Market
Singer's gesture	Flourishing his whiskers, raising his eyebrows, clasping his wrist and inclining his head, he mounted the platform and sang the poem of the White Horse. Relying on his earlier superiority, he glanced from left and right as if no-one else came near him. He felt that he stood in a class...	Up came a youth in a black cap, who was flanked by five or six attendants holding a funeral banner. He put his clothing in order and, most deliberate in bearing, stretched out his throat, delivered a phrase of song, and looked as though he could not win. Then he...
Singer's gesture	...of his own among his contemporaries and could not be brought low.	...sang the verse "Dew on the shallots." His voice rose clear and penetrating, -suche that 'the echoes shook the forest trees'."
Audience reaction	With one voice they acclaimed him.	Before the tune was finished his listeners were sobbing and sniffing as they hid tears.

Note: This table was organized with reference to the English translation of *The Tale of Liwa* by Dudbridge (1983).

Considering the examples of *The Tale of Li Wa* and the genealogy of stories that originated in the 9th century, street drama seems to have some basic elements, as I will explain in the next section.

3. **Basic Structure of the Love Story:**
 The Motif of a Man or Woman Saved or Destroyed by Love

The Tale of Li Wa is based on the universal and mythical narrative pattern of “the structure in which a male is rescued or destroyed by the love of a female.” This narrative structure is a companion to “the structure in which a female is

rescued or destroyed by the love of a male.” *The Tale of Li Wa* also has the basic structure of the story of a wandering holy aristocrat.

The Tale of Li Wa’s narrative type has the story structure, “a man saved/destroyed by the love of a woman.” Japanese narratives, such as *The Tale of Shintoku Maru* and *The Tale of Oguri Hangan*, also fall into this category. On the other hand, there are many versions of “a woman saved/destroyed by the love of a man,” such as the stories that manifest in *Sleeping Beauty*, *Cinderella*, *White Swan*, and so on.

As is typical in *The Tale of Li Wa*, the story of a wandering holy aristocrat is also the basic type of other popular stories. The structure of the above-mentioned “man saved/destroyed by the love of a woman,” and “woman saved/destroyed by the love of a man,” fuse with the story of the wandering holy aristocrat to create the audience’s impression.

Characters in the love story often take a four-quadrant personality type, as *The Tale of Li Wa* does, shown in Figure 5. The four quadrants’ characters can be classified into four types according to their gender, status, and the social situation in which they are located, and the story is mainly composed of four persons. Speaking of Chinese examples, *Legend of the White Snake* and the inherited Peking Opera have a typical four-quadrant structure similar to *Li Wa’s Tale*. There are countless examples, but I would like to mention *La Traviata* and *Swan Lake* as examples of typical romantic plays in Western Europe that follow this structure as well.

Conclusion: The Road of Love in the Eurasian Continent

Street theater is performed by the class, status, or group that does not belong to the elite class. The author or narrator often lives in a multicultural society and travels to multiple regions. The story’s protagonist is discriminated against or excluded from society somehow and is directed to have universal values because of these negative circumstances. The spectators are ordinary people who cannot go to the roofed theater.

Roofed theaters would eventually replace street plays. However, the story structure created by street theater is immutable. Why does street theater adopt such a universal structure? It is likely that, when performing, directing, and watching a story in a restricted space, time, and social situation limited by the era, it is only by having the aforementioned elements that the drama can have the universality that can break this limited space, time, and hierarchy.

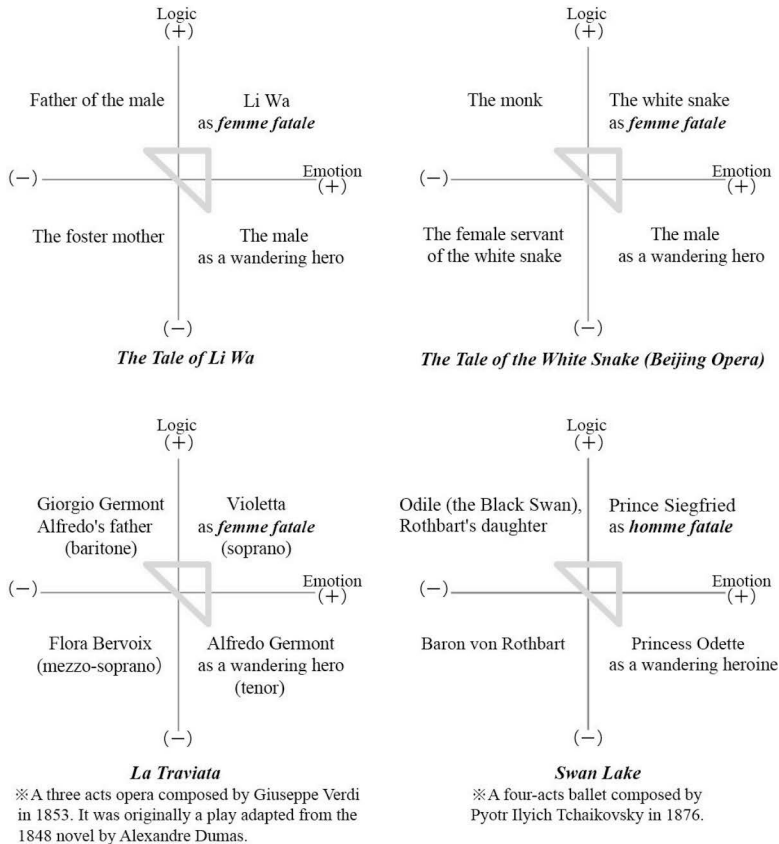


Fig.5 Four quadrant structure of love dramas

△ triangular relationship

Lastly, I would like to summarize this article based on the type of love drama. Love is an intellectual and inner play of the individual that creates affection for the other based on rules and manners. Among the origins and spread of love stories born within cities, I position *The Tale of Li Wa* as one of the earliest love stories in eastern Eurasia. Figure 6 shows a hypothesis of the spread of the love story in Eurasia.

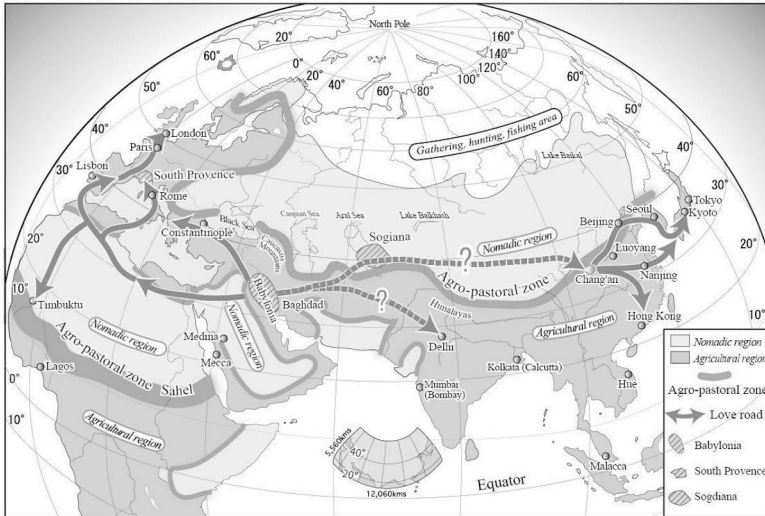


Fig.6 Spread of the love story in Eurasia

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