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The Dreamscape and the Prison Stage Space as Metaphor in The Peony Pavilion and Hamlet: A Philosophical Study

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Abstract: This study undertakes a comparative analysis of the theatrical spaces in *The Peony Pavilion* and *Hamlet*, aiming to move beyond conventional interpretations centered on "ultimate sentiment" (*qingzhi*) and existentialism, and instead, to explore the cross-cultural philosophical dialogue encoded within their spatial symbolism. Employing the conceptual frameworks of the "dreamscape of ultimate sentiment" and the "prison of existence," the investigation focuses on the seminal spaces of the garden and the castle. Through close reading and semiotic analysis, it demonstrates how the highly stylized garden in *The Peony Pavilion* materializes an expressive, sentiment-driven worldview (*qingben*), while the realistic castle in *Hamlet* operates as a metaphor for existential confinement and rational inquiry. The research argues that these spatial configurations provide a foundational anchor for cross-cultural theatrical comparison. Their juxtaposition fosters an interpretive paradigm of "interstitial wisdom"—not as a simple binary opposition, but as a means to reveal the dialogic interplay between these two philosophical perspectives through the medium of stage space. This paradigm not only opens new pathways for theatrical theory and practice but also constructs a dialogic bridge, grounded in spatial representation, between the Eastern tszzradition of lyrical expressiveness and the Western tradition of rational speculation in dramaturgical philosophy.

Keywords: The Peony Pavilion; Hamlet; Theatrical Space; Dreamscape of Ultimate Sentiment; Prison of Existence.

1. Introduction

This study examines how stage space embodies philosophical worldviews in cross-cultural theatre, focusing on Tang Xianzu's *The Peony Pavilion* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. *The Peony Pavilion*, grounded in late Ming "ultimate sentiment" (*qingzhi*), uses the garden as a "lyrical dreamscape" where emotion transcends reality. *Hamlet*, reflecting late Renaissance humanist crisis, portrays the castle as an "existential prison" of rational doubt and inaction. Their spatial contrast offers a basis for comparing Eastern and Western dramaturgical philosophies.

Current research often reduces these works to "romantic tragedy" or "revenge tragedy," overlooking space as a carrier of philosophical thought. This study addresses three questions: (1) How does stage space itself express ideas beyond surface narrative? (2) How can cross-cultural comparison avoid East-West binaries and instead reveal shared engagement with themes like truth and transcendence? (3) How can theatre studies, spatial theory, and comparative philosophy be integrated into a productive framework?

Using an interdisciplinary approach—close reading, semiotic analysis, philosophical hermeneutics, and comparative parallel study—this research analyzes spatial imagery, contextualizes philosophical ideas, and fosters structural dialogue between the two works. It aims to uncover the "interstitial wisdom" in their spatial poetics, contributing to cross-cultural theatrical dialogue and offering insights for contemporary practice, thus advancing both classical interpretation and theoretical innovation.

2. Spatial Philosophy and Existential Dialogue in The Peony Pavilion and Hamlet: A Comparative Study of Eastern and Western Dramatic Traditions

2.1. Between the Real and the Imagined: The Philosophy of Space and a Dialogue on Existence in The Peony Pavilion and Hamlet

Stage space is not merely a backdrop for plot but a core field where meaning is generated. The following sections decode the deeper significances of spatial symbols by examining iconic scenes from both plays. In *The Peony Pavilion*, key spaces—the Garden, the Underworld, and the Study—act

as dynamic agents in the drama's philosophical argument, embodying the liberation of passion (*qing*) from social constraint (*li*).

The Garden serves as a catalyst for awakening, where Du Liniang's encounter with untamed spring beauty ignites her natural desire, challenging Confucian discipline. Through virtual performance, this space merges reality and dream.

The Underworld functions as an institutional validator of passion. Portrayed with paradoxical mercy, it pardons Du Liniang for "dying of longing" and affirms her predestined bond, transforming death into a passage for love's return.

The Study represents passion's power to transcend materiality. Here, Liu Mengmei's ritualized devotion to a portrait animates the inanimate, demonstrating *qing* as a spiritual force that bridges life and death.

Together, these spaces trace a complete narrative of

emotional liberation—from awakening, through symbolic death and validation, to transcendent reunion—asserting passion as the ultimate life-giving force.

2.2. "Qing" as the Force of Continuous Life

Du Liniang's spring longing (*chun chou*) is not abstract but a somatic-emotional reality that leads to dream and transcends death. As Tang Xianzu states, passion (*qing*) moves the living to die and the dead to live—it becomes an ontological force driving the cycle of life, death, and rebirth, embodying the philosophy of "continuous life" (*shengsheng*). "Dream" as a Dimension of Reality Dream is not illusion but a space where emotional truth surpasses physical fact. When reality cannot contain authentic feeling, the dream becomes a truer realm of being—a deepening of the inward vitality central to "continuous life." The Philosophical Inscription on the Body Du Liniang's self-portrait preserves her identity beyond death, and her revival affirms the necessity of the physical body to realize earthly love. This corporeal emphasis resonates with Confucian care for the body, elevating it to a medium for the fulfillment of *qing*.

2.3. "Delay" as a Symptom of Existential Predicament

Hamlet's "To be, or not to be" reflects the collapse of actionable meaning in a world of conflicting values—feudal honor, Christian ethics, and humanist rationality. His delay dramatizes the modern individual's struggle to find justification for action. "Performance" as a Distorted Path to Truth

Hamlet's "antic disposition" reveals the tension between performance and authenticity. In a world of "bad faith," his role-playing becomes both a shield and a source of alienation, probing how one remains true to oneself. "Death" as the Ultimate Testing Ground for Meaning" Confronting Yorick's skull, Hamlet reaches a nihilistic equality in death. Yet this encounter with nothingness paradoxically leads to a resigned resolve: "the readiness is all." Death, as life's limit, gives meaning to finite action.

2.4. The Peony Pavilion and the Mind-Heart School Tradition of Late Ming "Philosophy of Vitality"

The creation of *The Peony Pavilion* corresponds to a pivotal period of intellectual transformation in the late Ming dynasty. During this era, the philosophy of Wang Yangming's Mind-Heart School and its subsequent developments significantly challenged the dominance of Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism, giving rise to an intellectual current that emphasized individual emotion and lived experience [1]. Deeply influenced by the Taizhou School's concept that "the daily life of ordinary people embodies the Way," Tang Xianzu's dramatic works distinctly reflect the aesthetic translation of the "emotion-as-substance" philosophy. As noted in cross-cultural drama studies methodology, understanding dramatic works necessitates situating them within their specific cultural-philosophical contexts. This perspective provides a methodological foundation for interpreting the spatial philosophy of *The Peony Pavilion* [2].

The construction of the garden space in the play embodies multiple layers of philosophical significance. From a semiotic perspective, the "garden" is not merely a representation of natural scenery but a symbolic system bearing specific cultural meanings. As indicated by [3], spatial symbols in dramatic texts often encapsulate profound cultural codes. In *The Peony Pavilion*, the garden, through the juxtaposition of "collapsed wells and crumbling walls" with "riotous blooms of color," constructs a symbolic space imbued with tension—simultaneously hinting at the loosening of Confucian order while showcasing the flourishing of natural vitality. This spatial arrangement resonates with the late Ming Mind-Heart School's proposition of "perceiving true nature through emotion," wherein the spontaneous expression of feeling becomes a significant path to accessing authentic existence.

It is noteworthy that the garden space also exhibits distinct processual characteristics. As noted in comparative studies of Chinese and Western stage presentation, Chinese theatrical spaces often possess qualities of fluidity and virtuality [4]. The garden in *The Peony Pavilion* exemplifies this characteristic; it is not a fixed physical location but a psychological space continuously reconstructed in accordance with the characters' emotional shifts. Du Liniang's emotional journey from "Wandering in the Garden" to "Startled by a Dream" and finally to "Seeking the Dream" essentially constitutes a process of spiritual metamorphosis and sublimation accomplished within this garden space. This interactive fusion of space and emotion represents a perfect manifestation of the late Ming "emotion-as-substance" philosophy within dramatic art.

2.5. Hamlet and the Existential Predicament of the Late Renaissance

The creative background of *Hamlet* aligns with a crucial turning point in European intellectual history. While the Renaissance achieved remarkable accomplishments in cultural and artistic domains, it also precipitated a profound crisis of values. With the advancement of the Reformation and the emergence of the Scientific Revolution, traditional worldviews and values began to falter, confronting individuals with unprecedented existential perplexity [5]. This zeitgeist finds concentrated expression in *Hamlet*, with the castle space serving as the material vessel for this spiritual predicament.

From the perspective of stage design, it is noted that English drama during Shakespeare's era had begun to emphasize the symbolic significance of stage space [6]. Elsinore Castle is not merely the physical setting for the dramatic plot but also a symbolic system rich in philosophical implication. The enclosed nature of the castle symbolizes the confinement of thought, its labyrinthine structure hints at cognitive dilemma, and the omnipresent surveillance reflects the suppression of human nature by power. Collectively, these spatial features construct the imagery of an "existential prison," forming a profound resonance with Hamlet's classic soliloquy, "To be, or not to be."

The castle space further reflects the distinctive transformation in spatiotemporal concepts characteristic of the late Renaissance. In comparative studies of Chinese and Western dramatic aesthetics, it is observed that Western drama, since the Renaissance, gradually developed more realistic and fixed concepts of time and space [7]. In *Hamlet*, although the castle constitutes a concrete physical space, through techniques such as the appearance of the ghost and the embedding of the play-within-the-play, Shakespeare disrupts the linear logic of time and space, creating a complex space where multiple realities coexist. This spatial treatment precisely mirrors the complexity of late Renaissance

perceptions of reality—encompassing both rational exploration of the objective world and the preserved imaginative space of the transcendent.

Particularly noteworthy is the special cultural significance of the spectral figure within the castle. As noted in comparative studies of ghost images in Chinese and Western classical drama, ghosts in Western theater often represent unfinished justice or unresolved historical enigmas [8]. The ghost of the old King in *Hamlet* not only propels the plot but also symbolizes history's entanglement with the present and the past's interrogation of the now. Consequently, the castle becomes a space where temporal layers are superimposed, containing present political conspiracies, echoes of historical specters, and future uncertainty. This multiplicity of time further intensifies the sense of existential predicament.

Through comparative analysis, it is evident that while the garden in *The Peony Pavilion* and the castle in *Hamlet* are both central dramatic spaces, they carry distinctly different philosophical implications and cultural functions. The garden represents the liberation of emotion and the transcendence of life, whereas the castle symbolizes existential dilemma and rational self-reflection. The divergence in these spatial forms originates from the different philosophical traditions and cultural contexts in which they are rooted, corroborating the significant viewpoint in cross-cultural drama studies that cultural differences must be acknowledged and examined [2].

3. Methodological Synthesis and Philosophical Counterpoint: An Integrated Framework for Comparative Spatial Analysis

3.1. The Peony Pavilion – The Garden as an "Emotional-Ideational Space":

The garden is governed by emotion (*qing*). Its physical elements serve emotional expression, and its presentation relies on stylized virtuality in performance. Space transitions follow emotional logic, allowing seamless movement between reality and dream. The "virtual" here is an "ontological plenitude"—a generative field where passion gains the power to transcend life and death. *Hamlet* – The Castle as a "Metaphorical Space": The castle is defined by material solidity. Its symbolic meaning arises from rational reflection on its physical attributes—decay, enclosure, surveillance—which are interpreted as metaphors for political corruption and existential confinement. Meaning is generated through "metaphorical sublimation from the actual to the virtual." Philosophical Counterpoint: The garden represents emotional ontology, where feeling creates reality. The castle represents existential reflectionism, where meaning is constructed through critical engagement with material reality. *The Peony Pavilion* – An "Experiential Space" of Fusion: The subject (Du Liniang) and object (garden) engage in "isomorphic interpenetration." External scenery and internal emotion resonate, and meaning arises from immersive, fusional experience. This reflects a monistic cosmology of mind-thing unity. *Hamlet* – An "Observational Space" of Confrontation: The castle is an alien "Other" confronting Hamlet's inner self. Meaning is generated through "alienated scrutiny" and "reflective distance," as the subject critically analyzes the oppressive external world. This foreshadows a dualistic epistemology and modern alienation.

Philosophical Counterpoint: The garden model emphasizes immersion and unity; the castle model emphasizes distance and scrutiny. *The Peony Pavilion* – A "Generative Space": Formally closed (walled garden) but essentially open. Its openness lies in the flow of time, the cycle of life/death/rebirth, and the transcendent overflow of emotion. It is a "vessel of life," pointing to a philosophy of continuous generation. *Hamlet* – A "Stagnant Space": Structurally, socially, and spiritually closed. The castle is a "vessel of death," characterized by decay, conspiracy, and existential entrapment. Its closure symbolizes an era's impasse and a state of nihilistic stagnation.

Philosophical Counterpoint: The garden is externally closed but spiritually open, enacting a philosophy of life. The castle is externally and spiritually closed, enacting an existential philosophy of dilemma.

3.2. Core Interpretative Issue: From Background to Philosophical Agent

Traditional views treat stage space as a passive "container." This study redefines it as an active "philosophical agent" shaping drama's core meaning. In *The Peony Pavilion*, the garden acts as a "catalyst," "court," and "sanctuary" for passion (*qing*), testing and transcending life and death. In *Hamlet*, the castle functions as an "oppressor" and "existential prison," materializing power, decay, and alienation. Thus, space is not a backdrop but the "dramatized embodiment" and "primary medium" through which philosophical thought is expressed and realized. Comparative Methodology: Heterogeneous Isomorphism and Dialogue To avoid East-West binaries, this study establishes a "universal human motif": how the finite individual seeks meaning and transcendence amid social order and existential predicament.

Through this lens, the garden and castle reveal "heterogeneous isomorphism."

3.3. Theoretical Integration: A Multi-Layered Analytical Framework for Comparative Spatial Studies

A problem-driven, three-tiered analytical framework is employed to systematically investigate the philosophical implications of stage space in both plays: (1) Dramaturgical Analysis (Text/Performance) functions as the "Microscope," focusing on how space is constructed, symbolically encoded, and performed within the dramatic text and its theatrical realization. (2) Spatial-Theoretical Analysis (Social Philosophy/Phenomenology) serves as the "X-ray Lens," penetrating surface representations to reveal the embedded power dynamics, existential structures, and deeper cultural logics that the spaces materialize. (3) Comparative Philosophical Analysis acts as the "Navigational Compass," grounding the spatial interpretations within their distinct cultural-intellectual traditions (e.g, Late Ming qing philosophy vs. Renaissance existentialism) while steering the inquiry toward their engagement with shared, universal human concerns or "meta-problems."

4. Results and Discussion

Through a cross-cultural comparative analysis of the theatrical spaces in *The Peony Pavilion* and *Hamlet*, this study yields three principal findings.

First, at the level of semiotic analysis, the "garden" and "castle" function not as mere backdrops but as symbolic

systems embodying fundamentally divergent philosophical cores. In *The Peony Pavilion*, the garden operates as an "emotional-ideational space" governed by *qing* (passion). Through the virtuality of Chinese operatic performance, spatial "emptiness" (*xu*) becomes an "ontological plenitude"—a generative field wherein passion transcends the boundaries of life and death. In *Hamlet*, the castle functions as a "reflective space." Its material attributes (enclosure, decay) undergo "metonymic sublimation" through Hamlet's rational scrutiny, generating metaphors of political corruption and existential confinement.

Second, at the level of comparative philosophy, these spatial models reflect fundamental divergences concerning the "subject-world relationship." The garden embodies "mind-thing interpenetration" (*xin wu jiao rong*): Du Liniang's fusion with external scene (*jing*) reflects the monistic cosmology of late Ming Mind-Heart School philosophy, wherein *qing* serves as an ontological bond. The castle embodies "subject-object opposition": as an alien "Other," it compels Hamlet's perpetual reflection, prefiguring the mind-world dualism of early modern Western thought.

Third, at the level of dramaturgical function, these spaces serve distinct dramatic motifs. The garden constitutes a "generative vessel of life": formally enclosed yet essentially open, it enables cycles of death and rebirth, manifesting the philosophy of "continuous life" (*shengsheng*). The castle constitutes a "stagnant vessel of death": an inescapable system where time suspends and action defers, symbolizing the existential impasse of the late Renaissance.

In summary, these findings reveal a profound phenomenon of "heterogeneous isomorphism" (*yi zhi tong gou*): both dramatic traditions employ space to explore humanity's relationship with the world, yet through opposing logics. The garden constructs a transcendent world of "life-in-death" through the logic of emotion; the castle constructs a predicament-ridden world of "death-in-life" through the logic of reason. Their juxtaposition generates an "interstitial wisdom" that illuminates, dialogically, the eternal human problematic of existence and transcendence.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates how the "garden" in *The Peony Pavilion* and the "castle" in *Hamlet* function as "philosophical agents" embodying distinct worldviews. The garden, as an emotional-ideational space, realizes the "continuous life" (*shengsheng*) of *qing* within the Chinese tradition; the castle, as a reflective space, stages the existential predicament of Renaissance humanism. These models are not binary oppositions but, through "heterogeneous isomorphism," jointly respond to universal questions of finitude, authenticity, and transcendence. The "interstitial wisdom" perspective offers a paradigm for cross-cultural theatre studies that transcends dualism, providing theoretical resources for contemporary dramaturgy engaging with classical Eastern and Western aesthetics. Future research may extend this spatial-analytical methodology to other canonical works, deepening our understanding of the pluralistic philosophical traditions informing world theatre.

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