

## *Macbeth* and *The Legend of White Snake*: Transcultural, Immersive Shakespeare in *Sleep No More Shanghai*

Li Zhuang

Florida State University

Xiangfen Cui

The Johns Hopkins University–Nanjing University Center for Chinese and American Studies

This paper analyzes how the Punchdrunk production team creates a successful transcultural immersive adaption of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in *Sleep No More Shanghai*. Weaving Shakespeare's renowned tragedy with the Chinese folklore of *The Legend of White Snake*, this adaptation fosters a unique intercultural dialogue about ambition, transgression, supernatural solicitations, and gender-role subversion. This paper first examines the transcultural adaptations of *Sleep No More Shanghai*, highlighting how physical space contributes to the immersive experience and narratives of those two stories. Subsequently, it focuses on important thematic elements that contribute to this successful transcultural adaptation. Blending the supernatural elements of an ancient Chinese cross-species romance with the Scottish legend, this adaptation challenges the dichotomy between "fact and fiction"—a key feature of immersive theater itself. Additionally, this paper dissects how the female characters in both stories possess nontraditional supernatural powers that pose a threat to traditional male authority through a comparative analysis of the female characters (Lady Macbeth and the witches) in *Macbeth* and the White Snake (Suzhen Bai) from *The Legend of White Snake*. The introduction of these femme fatales and their subsequent punishment are depicted through various aspects of the show, including choreography, costume design, lighting, sound effects, etc. Drawing on transcultural adaptation theories and feminist criticism, this paper explores how Punchdrunk's adaptation not only leverages the unique features of immersive theater, but also achieves a successful cultural synthesis by blending Eastern and Western classic narratives. *Sleep No More Shanghai* demonstrates the potential of transcultural adaptations to revitalize classic texts, rendering them accessible and relevant to contemporary global audiences.

*Keywords:* Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, immersive theater, *Sleep No More Shanghai*, transcultural adaptation, sinolization

British company Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More*, whose name originates from the line "Methought I heard a voice cry 'Sleep no more'" in *Macbeth*, Scene 2.2, is a great example of immersive adaptation in Shakespeare's works through its subversion of conventional fourth wall of theatrical practices. The audience of *Sleep No More*, rather than being passively placed in their seating before the stage, is invited to wear a mask and walk into the show. The immersive theater boasts of a highly intricate and thoughtfully designed physical setting where the audience is given the opportunity, not only to utilize conventional sensory organs of sight and hearing, but furthermore to touch, smell, and interact with actors (in

one-on-one performances), engaging in a whole new level of interaction that traditional theater cannot offer.

In a five-floor warehouse-turned-hotel, the audience is invited to run alongside the actors, stumble into mysterious backgrounds in a dimly lit labyrinth, develop their own viewing/gaming strategies, leading eventually to their unique, individualized interpretations of *Macbeth*. Following the critically acclaimed and commercially successful production of *Sleep No More* in New York, Punchdrunk made an audacious attempt to bring their immersive adaptation of Shakespeare's Scottish regicide story to a vibrant, new location: Shanghai, China. This localization presents significant challenges, as the production team must engage an audience that may have different cultural, philosophical, and literary backgrounds, along with limited exposure to Shakespearean theater.

*Macbeth* is one of Shakespeare's most widely adapted plays, with a rich history of cross-cultural adaptations spanning centuries and continents (Bladen et al., 2014). From Akira Kurosawa's Japanese film adaptation *Throne of Blood*

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Li Zhuang, Department of English, Florida State University; Xiangfen Cui, The Johns Hopkins University–Nanjing University Center for Chinese and American Studies.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Li Zhuang, Department of English, Florida State University, 405 Williams Building, Tallahassee, 32306, the U.S. E-mail: lz20v@fsu.edu

to Vishal Bhardwaj's Indian cinematic retelling, *Macbeth* has been recreated and invigorated in different cultures, proving that the themes of ambition and transgression could resonate with audiences from different linguistic and literary backgrounds. The sinolization of *Macbeth* burgeoned in the early 20th century during the New Cultural Movement, as it was performed on stage in the form of "Wenmingxi", a type of modern drama, largely dependent upon performers' improvisation with minimal scripting. During this period of time, *Macbeth* was given various titles including "The New South–North Peace" and "Calamity from Witches". It was later adapted into numerous traditional Chinese theater genres, including "Peking opera, Kun Opera, Shaoxing Opera, Shanghai Opera, Cantonese Opera, Sichuan Opera, Song-and-dance Duet, Chaozhou Opera" (Li, 2020, p. 55).

The first adaptation of *Macbeth* into Peking Opera, *The Kingdom of Desire*, was brought to life on stage in 1986 by Taiwan's Contemporary Legend Theatre. The play received critical acclaim, and the production team was invited to perform at the Royal National Theatre in England (Huang, 2009). In the same year, this renowned Shakespeare tragedy was adapted into one of the oldest Chinese opera genres, Kun Opera, and was renamed "The Bloody Hands." In the following years, as the story of the troubled Scottish general became more and more familiar to the Chinese audience, adaptations of *Macbeth* have continued to evolve, appearing on both regional and national theaters.

Despite the success of previous adaptations, it is important to note that Punchdrunk faces a unique challenge in bringing *Macbeth* to the Chinese audience through immersive theater. The complicated themes of the Shakespearean tragedy have to be made accessible in an experimental form that relies solely on the actors' body language. Furthermore, the interactive nature of immersive theater likewise places greater demands on the audience. Popat points out in *Invisible Connections: Dance, Choreography and Internet Communities* that "in interactive artworks, the power given to the audiences is far greater, and they are made aware of its existence" (Popat, 2006, p. 34). To gain a full "immersive" experience, the audience of *Sleep No More Shanghai* not only needs to have a basic understanding of the plotline but also become active participants in the story-making process. Each audience member crafts their own narrative, leading to unique interpretations of the experience. The audience shoulders part of the playwrights' responsibility in this interactive game and their presence is crucial in the meaning-making process. However, Biggins (2017) emphasizes the potential risks of

confusing and disorienting the audience since the nature of immersive theater means that its chronology and narrative structure are constantly being disrupted and reinvented as the spectators physically roam around the story world and chance upon different events without a clear temporal or spatial order:

Unable to see everything, blocked from building up an understanding of the "whole story" via the path of an individual discourse: when the sense of a wider story and an audience member's sense of her own plot come into conflict, the result is a sense of missing or unclear narrative—anxiety over doing it wrong or being in the wrong place—a botched immersive experience (p. 120).

### **Transcultural Adaptation: Weaving *The Legend of White Snake* into *Macbeth***

In the four-mode taxonomy of interactivity proposed by Salen and Zimmerman (2004), "beyond-the-object interactivity, cultural participation" is one of the factors that determine the level of interaction an audience could have with a cultural product like immersive theater (p. 69). Apart from immersing Chinese fans in a spatial setting reminiscent of 1930s Shanghai, Punchdrunk also introduces a brand new subplot of Chinese folklore of *The Legend of White Snake*. In *The Punchdrunk Encyclopaedia*, Machon (2018) observes that "the Chinese legend of 'The White Snake' now serves as the narrative anchor" for *Sleep No More Shanghai* (p. 260). Similarly, Biggins (2017) stressed the importance of the audience's prior knowledge of the storyline for immersive theater since "the level of familiarity with the source text may affect a spectator becoming immersed in the show on its own terms, or delighting in the way Punchdrunk are ringing the changes on something she knows well" (p. 137). This section will examine the significance of Punchdrunk's incorporation of *The Legend of White Snake* into the narrative of *Macbeth* in *Sleep No More Shanghai* and will also cover analysis of the important elements that contribute to the success of building a transcultural multinarrative—how Punchdrunk seamlessly blends the Chinese folklore with Shakespeare's regicide tragedy.

With its first appearance dating back to the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE), *The Legend of White Snake* has a rich literary history in China and has undergone significant developments and transformations over the centuries. Throughout its history, the story has been retold and reimagined in different ways,

reflecting changes in Chinese cultural and political contexts, as well as the evolving moral values of the society. The most popular and widely used version of *The Legend of White Snake* is the vernacular fiction *The White Maiden Locked for Eternity in the Leifeng Pagoda* published in 1624 by scholar and writer Menglong Feng. In Feng's version of the story, Suzhen Bai (White Snake) and Xiaoqing (Green Snake), who have practiced their supernatural power for years, finally transform their bodies into human-beings. While wandering around West Lake, they meet a young man named Xian Xu. Bai falls in love with Xu and they get married. However, their happiness is short-lived as a monk named Hai Fa discovers Bai's real identity as the snake spirit and sees their human-spirit marriage as a threat to the order of human society. Fa sets out to separate the couple and convinces Xu to drink a special wine that will expose his wife's true identity. In the end, Bai is forced to reveal her snake form. She is captured by Fa and imprisoned in Leifeng Pagoda. This ancient Chinese folklore has been reinterpreted and adapted into various forms of theater, including Kunqu (also known as Kun Opera), Peking Opera, Ballet, etc.

Punchdrunk's decision to embed *The Legend of White Snake*, an ancient Chinese cross-species romance into the plotline of *Macbeth*, might be surprising to scholars and critics. However, the supernatural elements and the overlapping themes in both works offer rich opportunities for building a transcultural narrative. Although very different in contexts and writing style, *The Legend of White Snake* and *Macbeth* both deal with the consequences of giving in to temptation and desire, which lead to transgressions and ultimately tragic endings for the heroines. In both stories, supernatural forces represent the limitation of human power and the fear of losing control over one's fate. Both works also challenge traditional gender norms, with strong female characters taking center stage and exerting power over their husband's decisions. Those overlapping themes create an opportunity for enmeshed plotlines in *Sleep No More Shanghai*, where Chinese audiences are anchored in the aesthetics and in-world rules of *The Tale of White Snake*, and they are offered the freedom to navigate the less familiar world of Shakespeare's story, the juxtaposition of the Eastern and Western storyworlds and the balance of the familiar and the unfamiliar that makes room for a successful transcultural adaptation. *Sleep No More*'s reliance on the actors' nonverbal performance, as opposed to traditional semiotic systems, allows for easier transcultural adaptations as there is no language barrier to overcome. This is helpful in the incorporation of *The Legend of White Snake*

into the plotline of *Macbeth*, as both stories can be conveyed through the actors' body language alone.

### The Impact of Multispaces in *Sleep No More Shanghai*

In a cross-cultural setting like *Sleep No More Shanghai*, the risk of the audience feeling disconnected and disoriented from the narrative and having a "botched immersive experience" is even greater, which demands Punchdrunk to incorporate different localization strategies including the architecture design. For architect theorists, architecture design always involves a fusion of time and space, and "we do not live only in space and place as we also inhabit time" (Pallasmaa, 2011). The participatory nature of Punchdrunk theater and the special audience-event relationship mean that "the location, history, and interaction of that space/place becomes heightened ..." (Machon, 2018, p. 134). The spatial and temporal setting of *Sleep No More* is a key component of the Punchdrunk production. McKinnon Hotel's physical location (West Beijing Road, Jing'an District) and its interior decoration evoke memories of early 20th-century Shanghai when the Eastern and Western cultures both collided and intersected (see Figure 1).

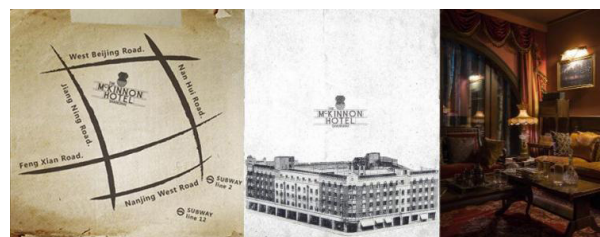


Figure 1. The Location, Exterior, and Interior Design of McKinnon Hotel in Shanghai

After the Second Opium War, Western colonialist powers like the British and the French established foreign concessions within Shanghai, and this period saw the emergence of Shanghai as a cosmopolitan city (Jackson, 2018). Despite the political suppression and economic exploitation from the colonialist powers, Shanghai, as a major treaty port, rose as a global trade hub and a "crucible of modernism" (Goodman & Goodman, 2012, p. 19). The city's thriving economy and increasing foreign presence were reflected in the construction of luxurious hotels such as the Cathay Hotel and the Peach Hotel, which sat near the current location of McKinnon Hotel. The design of McKinnon Hotel was jointly completed by

two design teams, one international and one local, under the guidance of the main designer Felix. According to Shanghai Daily's 2024 backstage interview<sup>1</sup> with the resident director, Eric Jackson Bradley, *Sleep No More Shanghai's* design team drew upon a variety of historical resources to create an authentic representation of early 20th-century Shanghai in the McKinnon Hotel, where the show takes place. The team conducted extensive research in Shanghai's archives and museums, and examined the architectural blueprint of the historic Peace Hotel (now under the name of Fairmont Peace Hotel), in order to accurately capture the appearance and ambiance of Shanghai hotels during the 1930s. From tiling, painting walls to building furniture, designing wallpaper, and curtains, Punchdrunk collaborated with the local design team to make the physical space of *Sleep No More* evocative of Shanghai's cosmopolitan past, where Western plays like Shakespeare's *Macbeth* were introduced to curious Chinese audiences. By staging the production in a city that historically serves as a cultural bridge between the West and China, where multiple cultural traditions have intertwined and merged with each other, Punchdrunk puts Chinese audiences in an atmosphere where they can put down their doubts and feel more at ease in exploring the themes of this Shakespeare classic. As the audience navigate the 1930s Shanghai hotel setting, they can easily feel a sense of pride in Shanghai's historical and present role as a center of cultural convergence and innovation. Punchdrunk's choice of location for their first immersive theater in China shows their consideration of the special features of Shanghai as the current economic center and its rich past of cultural exchanges.

The McKinnon Hotel's six-story labyrinthine structure with over 90 rooms is a perfect physical setting for creating multispaces for *Sleep No More Shanghai*. Felix Barrett, Punchdrunk's artistic director, highlights the importance of Shanghai as a densely-populated and compact city and McKinnon Hotel's complex interior design in creating layered meaning for his immersive theater. "Maybe because the nature of compact cities is they have a more exploratory and adventurous side in their fabric; they are often built upwards so it's all layered on top of each other. McKinnon is literally built for this town" (Irvine, 2017). The spatial design of McKinnon Hotel allows for multiple scenes and events to occur at the same time, which enables Punchdrunk to build multi-layered narratives and highly individualized immersive experiences. Audiences will experience performances in

different spatial and temporal order, as they roam freely in this multi-storied hotel. They might chance into a room where the subplot of *The Legend of White Snake* is unrolling, which disrupts and intersects with the main narrative of *Macbeth*. The show's repetitive nature also encourages the audience to follow different routes for each one hour loop, and they will gather at the dining hall and witness the same ending three times, which symbolizes the irresistibility of destiny. Just like *Macbeth*, who fights in vain against the three witches' prophecy, the audience who takes different routes and follows different actors will gather at the same location and meet the same ending.

The use of multispaces offers the audience a more intimate experience—with small groups of people exploring different rooms and interacting with the finely detailed props within those physical spaces. Each room is meticulously designed with a unique selection of furnishings, historical artifacts, and artwork, to effectively transport the audience to different scenes of *Macbeth* and *The Legend of White Snake*. For example, in the "Pharmacist's Office" room, audiences are presented with an array of glass bottles containing traditional Chinese medicines, ranging from ginseng steeped in wine to dried scorpions, which Chinese people believe to have the power of relieving pain and improving blood circulation. The "Pharmacist's Office" room also reminds the audience of the profession of Xian Xu, the male protagonist in *The Legend of White Snake*, who is an apprentice in a local medicinal shop in Hangzhou. The walls of the hallways are pasted with ads from the 1930s, ranging from branded cigarettes to local nightclubs. It is interesting to note that one poster is a replica of the poster for Peking Opera: *The Legend of White Snake* in 1930s, showing the production team's attention to details.

The careful attention to details in these rooms not only creates a sense of immersion but also helps to build the storyline for the performance. For example, in the scene where Xu and the white snake get married, the production team makes the Chinese nuptial site a bamboo forest, which easily reminds the audience of Ang Lee's Oscar-winning movie *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. The audience witness the newly-wed couple perform the ritual of "Jiaobeijiu," a ritual that the couple intertwine their arms while drinking from their respective glass to symbolize the union, with the red threads crisscross through the bamboo forest, invoking the Chinese legend of Yue Lao, the matchmaker, tying the red strings of fate at lovers' ankle. The red threads also resemble the caution lines in crime scenes which showcase the lurking danger beneath the happy marriage. The cultural connotations behind

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I6BFQs8U9pg>



the bamboo forests, the Chinese nuptial ceremony, and the red threads make it easier for the Chinese audience to fully immerse in the love story of *The Legend of the White Snake*. They also create the common ground where they can compare the tragic marriage between Xu and the white snake with that of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Similarly, in the final “Banquet Hall” scene, the ballroom is enshrouded in a dim, red light, hinting the bloody ending of the show where Macbeth gets hanged in front of the audience. The arrangement of the performers sitting around a long and rectangular banquet table, raising their wine glasses in slow motion, can easily remind the audience of Leonardo da Vinci’s iconic painting *The Last Supper*, as well as the famous banquet scene where Macbeth is tormented by his hallucination and sees Banquo’s ghost. The physical setting and the visual cues reinforce the thematic underpinnings of ambition and betrayal that are central to the plot of *Macbeth*.

### **The Interplay of the Real and the Unreal: The Fantastical Element of *Macbeth* and the Buddhist Influence of *The Legend of White Snake***

Ryan (2001) states that apart from “spatial immersion,” “the response to setting,” “temporal immersion, the response to the plot” and “emotional immersion, the response to the character” could be equally important in making the audience feel more engaged with the narrative in immersive theater (p. 121). When discussing the definition of immersive theater, Machon (2018) argues that “the [immersive] even must establish a unique, which is created through a dexterous use of space, scenography, sound, duration within interdisciplinary (or hybridized) practice” (p. 278). “In-its-own-world-ness” is a noteworthy concept because immersive theater, compared to traditional theater, creates both a physical and an imagined/fictive world. The interplay of these two worlds “blur[s] the boundaries between life and art,” challenges the dichotomy between “fact and fiction,” and fosters a more dynamic interaction between the audience and the performance (p. 69). Immersive theater’s unique feature of blurring the boundaries between the real and unreal creates a great setting for exploring the fantastical elements in *Macbeth* and the Buddhist influence of *The Legend of White Snake*, which both question the nature of reality and emphasize the transient and empty nature of human existence.

The supernatural atmosphere of *Macbeth*’s opening scene and the three witches’ enigmatic chorus sets the tone for

the whole play—that the boundaries between what is real and what is not can be blurred and appearances are often deceptive. As Garber (2004) aptly points out, “Macbeth begins with witches. Before the inception of the play propels, before the audience is introduced to the title character or any of the Scottish nobility or soldiery, the stage is overtaken by creates of another world” (p. 696). It is hardly a coincidence that the three witches appear so early on stage in *Macbeth* and the power they possess is so immense, compared to the little space they take in the actual text (of the thirty-one scenes in the critical version of *New Oxford Shakespeare*, the witches only directly appear in 4 scenes—1.1, 1.3, 3.5, and 4.1). In Scene 1.1, the three witches are introduced in a mysterious setting of thunder and lightning, and scholars have interpreted this scene as symbolic of the witches’ role as embodiments of a larger-than-human force, representing “the agents of destiny.”<sup>2</sup> The witches’ chorus, “Fair-is-Foul and Foul is Fair” warns the audience of the limitation of human perception and that things are not always as they seem (Scene 1.1.9). The juxtaposition of “fair and foul” also reveals the perplexing nature of destiny, which highlights the limited power humans possess. This chiasmus is so important that in Scene 1.3, before the two Scottish generals run into the three witches in the heath, Macbeth already makes a paradoxical comment himself, “so foul and fair a day I have not seen” (Scene 1.3.33). After the three witches hail Macbeth as “Thane of Glamis,” “Thane of Cawdor,” and King of Scotland, the first response Banquo makes is “Good Sir, why do you start, and seem to fear things that do sound so fair?” (Scene 1.3.46–47). Notice how the “fair” and “foul” become recurring motifs that guide the conversation between Macbeth and the witches. That the two extreme ends of a spectrum could be easily translated into each other also means that boundaries between “the real and the imaginary, the physical and the mental, the objective and the subjective, the description and the narration, the actual and the virtual” could be easily crossed (Deleuze, 1989, p. 325). The thin line between reality and illusion is also manifested in Shakespeare’s characterization of Macbeth. As Macbeth’s ambition becomes more unchecked, his perception of reality becomes increasingly distorted, serving as an important sign of his descent into madness. In Scene 2.1, before murdering King Duncan, Macbeth sees a bloody dagger floating in the air which leads him to question the reliability of human perception and the limits of the mind’s ability to differentiate between reality and illusion. As Macbeth’s unchecked

<sup>2</sup> The editors’ notes of *New Oxford Shakespeare*, Scene 1.1.0 “Thunder and Lightning.”

ambition drives him to commit more murders, his mind becomes increasingly consumed by guilt and his grip on reality weakens. His mental deterioration is reflected in the recurrence of his hallucinations, culminating in him seeing Banquo's ghost at his banquet. Before Macbeth meets his final downfall, he makes one of the most important soliloquies in this whole play:

Out, out, brief candle!  
 Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
 And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
 Signifying nothing.

(Scene 5.5.23–27)

The famous line “Out, out, brief candle!” points out the inevitability of death, and the fragility of human existence. “Life's but a walking shadow” easily reminds the readers of Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*—people's perception of life might just be the flickering shadows on the wall of the cave. Can humans really get to know the reality, or reality is just a far-fetched concept humans use to assert a sense of control that they don't have? The idea of life “Signifying nothing” is reminiscent of Buddhist philosophy, specifically the concept of emptiness, which refers to the lack of inherent meaning in all phenomena. Macbeth's fervent pursuit of power and his ultimate downfall can be seen through the lens of emptiness since it could be interpreted in Buddhist philosophy, as a never-ending cycle of suffering due to over-attachment to transient things, ultimately leading to the revelation of emptiness (that life is but sound and fury, signifying nothing).

Similar to *Macbeth*, *The Legend of White Snake* also raises questions about the nature of reality and illusion. Like many other Chinese ancient folklores, *The Legend of White Snake* is deeply influenced by Buddhist philosophy, particularly the concepts of emptiness and nonduality. The homepage of *Sleep No More Shanghai*'s website features an invitation letter, written in a handwriting font and directly addressing prospective audiences, providing an initial orientation to the production's themes and immersive format:

Dear Esteemed Guests,  
 All appearances are illusory.  
 The McKinnon Hotel has now extended bookings  
 through 30th JUNE. Room 802 has been reopened.  
 We patiently await your visit.

The McKinnon Hotel

(Punchdrunk, n.d.)

The opening line “All appearances are illusory”, is a quote taken from the Buddhist classic *Diamon Sutra*. The line speaks to the central tenet of Buddhism: everything we experience is a mere illusion, and we must look beyond appearances to find true wisdom. This line is a great introduction to the shared themes of deception and illusion in *Macbeth* and *The Legend of White Snake*. In *Macbeth*, supernatural elements like the witches' prophecies and the corrupting force of ambition create a world of deception and illusion, where appearances are not what they seem. Similarly, in *The Legend of White Snake*, the white snake spirit disguises herself as a woman and enters the human world, deceiving her husband Xu. The romantic relationship between Xu, a human, and Bai, a white snake, starts with lies, which lead to their tragic separation in the end. Driven by desire and ambition, both Macbeth and Bai made transgressions and in the end, get punished for their transgressive behaviors. Macbeth's ambition for power leads him to commit regicide and he becomes trapped in a cycle of violence that ultimately leads to his downfall. Similarly, Bai's love for Xu compels her to repeatedly lie to him, and when her true identity is at risk of being exposed, she threatens to bring havoc to the human world, resulting in her imprisonment by monk Fa.

The themes of deception and illusion in *Macbeth* and *The Legend of White Snake* connect two stories and make them great material for immersive theater, which in its form breaks the boundary between reality and fictive. Punchdrunk production team asks the audience to question what they see throughout their journey in McKinnon Hotel—to look beyond appearances to find deeper truths.

### Nontraditional Female Power and Subversion of Gender Dynamic

Feminist theorists like Alfar (2002) and Grosz (1994)<sup>3</sup> argue that in folklore and legends, female bodies undergo a transition from being commodities to specters and their supernatural power is regarded as “haunting” and challenging the patriarchal order. The women with their nontraditional power

<sup>3</sup> Grosz argues that female body is a “site of social, political, cultural, and geographical inscriptions,” and Alfar argues when “women fail to perform their femininity through ... submission and obedience, they are accused of monstrosity and manliness.”

are thus seen as “evil specters,” and their transgression needs to be punished so the gender hierarchy can be maintained. In this sense, the socially constructed “female evil” is a powerful weapon to defend patriarchal social, cultural, and moral order. The three witches plus Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* and the White Snake in *The Legend of White Snake* are such examples of arbitrarily constructed evil female characters. It is not surprising that in *Sleep No More Shanghai*, the transformation of Bai from her human form to a snake spirit is followed by the frenetic dancing scene of the three witches.

In *Macbeth*, the male protagonists’ fate is predetermined by the three witches’ prophecies and the men’s efforts are futile against the supernatural power. The fact that Macbeth’s fate is sealed from the beginning and his efforts of fighting against the prophesy and changing his life trajectory are fruitless, makes Macbeth, the murderer of King Duncan, a victim of the witches’ supernatural power. From the witches’ first appearance in Act 1, Scene 1, their chorus of “Fair-is-Foul and Foul-is-Fair/Hover through the fog and filthy air” showcases the characters are going into a magical realm, a gray area that defies logic and reason, a realm in which Macbeth, no matter how mighty and valiant a warrior he is, feels baffled and powerless (Scene 1.1.9–10). The witches’ prophecy that Macbeth will become Thane of Cawdor and the king of Scotland plants a seed in Macbeth’s heart and stirs up his ambition, thus luring Macbeth into the tragedy of regicide. Their prophecy that Banquo’s son will become the king also leads to Macbeth’s brutal murder of his former friend. It is also worth noticing that the witches not only foretell Macbeth’s fate but also are deliberately leading him to his downfall. The half-truth of the witches’ omens in Act 4: “none of woman born shall harm Macbeth,” and Macbeth will not be defeated until “Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane” give Macbeth a false hope of triumph and a sense of security. The fallacy in their omens leads Macbeth to make hasty decision in battlefield, which ends in Macbeth’s demise in his war against Prince Malcolm.

In the immersive setting of *Sleep No More*, the witches’ otherworldly power and their seductive nature are rendered in the famous scene Witches’ Rave. The combination of the dim lighting of the Manderley Bar and the flash of strobe lights creates a sense of disorientation for the audience, which mirrors the enigmatic nature of the witches’ omens and Macbeth’s own bewilderment. The three witches’ seductive dancing movement, their captivating interaction with the audience, together with the shift to techno music, showcase the witches’ power to entice Macbeth to let go of his rationality and

embrace his darker impulses. The use of the goat head mask in this scene successfully evokes the demonic and primal power that the three witches represent, a force that no human can escape from.

Similar to the three witches in *Macbeth*, Bai, the white snake’s supernatural forces are seen as transgressive and destructive to the patriarchal order. Bai, a snake spirit, who possesses the power of transforming into a woman, straddles between two worlds, the mysterious natural/spirit world and the male-dominant human world. When Bai takes on the form of a beautiful woman, she exemplifies traditional femininity and acts in the role of a nurturing wife to Xu. Whereas, when Bai assumes her snake form, she possesses masculine characteristics and becomes a forceful, supernatural presence, which allows her dominance over her husband Xu, a mortal man. Bai’s embodiment of both masculinity and femininity and her subversion of gender norms makes her a transgressive “evil female.” Like the witches in *Macbeth*, Bai’s superpower female power is seen as disruptive to human order and needs to be punished by Monk Fa, who represents patriarchal authority. Fa’s relentless pursuit of separating Bai and Xu, and in the end, imprisoning Bai under the Leifeng Pagoda symbolizes the suppression of female power. This gender reversion and transgression are not just performed but also experienced by the audience, making the narrative more immediate and impactful.

In *Sleep No More Shanghai*, the plotline and the performance of Bai from *The Legend of White Snake* and the witches from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* are artfully intertwined. Through the intersection of the narrative, choreography, visual, and sound effect, Punchdrunk production team presents a direct juxtaposition between the Western and the Eastern “Femme Fatale.” In the play, Bai’s costume and hairstyle resemble those of the sexy witch, and the visual parallel suggests to the audience the dark and supernatural power shared by both female characters.

The striking scene of Bai’s revelation of her snake form is artfully merged with the goddess of witchcraft, Hecate’s singing of *My Funny Valentine* in the Eden’s Happiness Bar. As Hecate’s singing transitions from a seductive, mellow female voice to a husky male voice as the light darkens. The grotesque vocal transformation not only symbolizes the fluidity of gender in both witches and Bai but also signals to the audience that Bai’s previously hidden, darker, and more violent snake side is about to reveal. After the song is completed, it is Hecate who opens the wooden box and presents Xu and Bai the Xionghuang Wine, which is

commonly used in ancient China to exorcise snake spirit. In the merging of the main plot of *Macbeth* and the subplot of *The Legend of White Snake*, the witch's role is similar in both narratives. Much like the witches in *Macbeth*, the witch in this scene acts as a catalyst, subtly influencing events that lead to Bai's tragic ending. While she does not directly force Bai to drink the wine (it is Monk Fa's role), her presenting the poisonous wine from the wooden box and encouraging the happy couple to drink it plant the seed of tragedy just like the three witches' prophecy for Macbeth.

The choreography of Bai's dancing in the scene of her revelation is a combination of contrasting elements: femininity and masculinity, grace and wildness, human and animalistic. The wriggling of her torso and the twists of her limbs mimic the wriggling movements of a snake. The serpentine dancing is a manifestation of Bai's complicated identity when the traditional feminine façade is torn and the frenetic, while the animalistic movement showcases the primal power of Bai's snake body. The dance routine showcases a wish to break free, not only from the restrictive female body but also from the suppressive patriarchal social structure.

Apart from building an intercultural and intertextual link between the witches and Bai, Punchdrunk production team also manages to build connections between two heroines of the stories—Lady Macbeth from *Macbeth* and Bai from *The Legend of White Snake*. Both women represent the archetype of the “evil female” that brings disaster to their husbands and their female power is viewed as transgression. The heroines' challenge of traditional roles and their de facto dominance over their husbands make them seen as a threat to the social order. In *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth is blamed as “Femme Fatale” who convinces her husband to commit a series of murders. Contrary to her belief that before King Duncan's murder, “a little water clears us of this deed,” she is haunted by the smell of blood and her fall into insanity is marked by her hallucination of bloodstains (Scene 2.2.64). In *Sleep No More Shanghai*, the audience witness Lady Macbeth's futile attempt of cleansing herself in a bathtub full of bloody water. This scene is a smart rendition of Macbeth's fear: “Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood/Clean from my hand? No; This my hand will rather/The multitudinous seas incarnadine, making the green one red” (Scene 2.2.57–60). In a similar way, Bai's transformation to snake spirit in *Sleep No More Shanghai* is also linked to the imagery of blood. When the audience follow Bai all the way to the psychiatric hospital on the top floor, they find her body covered in blood, which builds a strong visual connection with Lady Macbeth after the

regicide happens. After her husband Xu faints at the sight of her snake form, Bai crawls to the next room, where a water basin is set at the center, and a bath towel is arranged in the shape of a cross. The white snake washes the blood off her face with water from the basin, which mirrors Lady Macbeth's famous bathing scene.

This intertextual connection of the heroines functions as narrative threads that successfully blend the main plot of *Macbeth* and the subplot of *The Legend of White Snake*. The narrative arcs of the Eastern and Western texts intertwine naturally as the audience start to make the mental connection between the two powerful women punished by their challenges against the male-dominated social order. The visual and symbolic links the show establishes also deepens the show's exploration of universal themes like ambition, guilt, female power, and transgression.

## Conclusion

The immersive theater production *Sleep No More Shanghai* offers a groundbreaking exploration of transcultural adaption, successfully intertwining the iconic stories of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and the Chinese folklore, *The Legend of White Snake*. The innovative use of spatial, temporal, and emotional immersion allows for a more intimate and personalized viewing experience and enhances the narrative effectiveness. The thematic overlaps of supernatural elements and women's subversive power create possibility for Punchdrunk to blend these two stories in the main narrative. Through the performers' dynamic body languages, and the production team's meticulous design of lighting, sound, props, and make-up, *Sleep No More Shanghai* serves as a testament to the power of immersive theater to transform traditional narratives and to create a space where cultural boundaries are not just blurred, crossed, but also redefined. It showcases the potential of global theater to be a platform for cultural exchange and a catalyst for artistic innovation.

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