

# The Grey Space Construction Design of Lin Huiyin's Stage Art

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## ABSTRACT

In the 1920s, when the new discipline of drama was first introduced to China for only a decade or so, Lin Huiyin began to approach this art and practiced performance design personally, becoming the first Chinese female scholar to receive training in stage design in the West, and her research results in the field of architecture were also displayed in her stage art creation. Grey space in architecture refers to a transitional intermediary space between the more enclosed indoor space and the open outdoor space. Due to the unique spatial layout and architectural structure of ancient Chinese houses, many intermediary and transitional grey spaces had a high frequency of occurrence. This spatial structure characteristic was also applied to the stage art creation of Prof. Lin Huiyin.

**Keywords:** *Lin Huiyin, Grey space, Stage art design, Stage setting.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION: BACKGROUND OF LIN HUIYIN'S STAGE ART CREATION

### 1.1 Family Background

Lin Huiyin came from a family of scholars, with a deep academic tradition, cultural roots and the boldness and insight of "copinism". Her excellent family background provided her with the opportunity to receive a Western-style education. From Shanghai Aiguo Primary School, Beijing Peihua Girls' High School to studying in the U.S. later on, all the experiences were increasing her reserve of "two cultures". The more important and valuable thing that Lin Huiyin's family brought to her was that it allowed her to truly acquire a new understanding and rethinking of her independent and free personality, the value of her own life, and her own equality and freedom, which also laid a good foundation for her to eventually become an intellectual woman of the new generation.

### 1.2 Drama Study Experience

From a superior family background, Lin Huiyin was exposed to the art of drama earlier than others. In 1924, Tagore visited China, and Lin Huiyin

accompanied him as an interpreter. And the Crescent Moon Society staged the drama "Chitra" on Tagore's birthday as a tribute to him, and Lin Huiyin, the interpreter, was the perfect choice for the female leading role. The performance was a great success and Lin Huiyin's heartfelt and sincere performance was highly praised by Tagore. In June of the same year, Lin Huiyin and Liang Qichao went to the United States to study at the University of Pennsylvania, and because the Department of Architecture didn't recruit female students, Lin Huiyin joined the Department of Fine Arts instead, and then used her spare time to participate in the activities of the "Chinese Drama Reform Society". In 1927, she went to School of Drama of Yale University to engage in stage design, becoming the first person to study stage art systematically in China.

## 2. CHARACTERISTICS OF LIN HUIYIN'S STAGE ART CREATION

In 1935, Cao Yu adapted Moliere's play "The Miser" into a stage play "The Madman of Money" ("Figure 1"). However, when he was working on it, he was troubled by the traditional stage design method's being too old-fashioned, so someone recommended Lin Huiyin to him. Lin Huiyin

cleverly combined the theory of spatial architecture and traditional stage art design, and the stage of the performance was integrated with the architecture of the venue, breaking the fourth wall in the space,

and the audience felt very strange with the extended space. The performance caused a big sensation and was also hailed as "a masterpiece in Tianjin drama circle".



Figure 1 Stage photos from the stage play "The Madman of Money".

### **2.1 The "Imaginative" Presentation of the Dramatic Atmosphere**

Classical Chinese corridors, side halls and courtyards gave the ancient Chinese literati unlimited room for imagination. In her essay "Spider Web and Plum Blossom", Lin Huiyin wrote: "The most regrettable flower is the "spring red" like Chinese flowering crabapple, which is so tender, lovely and bright ... But in the West, even if there are same flowers like ours, they still lack our corridors, side halls and courtyards ...". In this passage, it is easy to see that Lin Huiyin's pursuit and love of imaginative things is also applied to her stage design practice.

In the design of "The Madman of Money", she directly jumped out of the theater environment and moved the performance to the outdoor Chinese pavilions, terraces and open halls, making use of the characteristics of the building itself to make the performance environment more layered and more realistic and reliable, and trying her best to create a theater illusion outside of the environmental restrictions of the theater. The fourth wall was built to immerse the audience into the theatrical situation. In the era of stage art design with lots of props, Lin Huiyin boldly did "subtraction", avoiding the cumbersome and attempting to create the intention of "emptiness" and "solitude" in the space. This imaginative presentation is evident in Xiao Qian's description: "On such a stage with extremely limited depth and width, the architect, unwilling to be constrained by space, used the extremely three-dimensional pavilion with stone steps and the bright blue sky to create a vast realm for the audience's visual fantasy". It is the same as what the stage setting hopes to convey to the audience, that is, to

create an imaginative expression beyond the limits of space in a realistic, layered and objective space, thus resonating with the audience. Being "gently bright, weirdly colourful, and clearly broad", the transparent architectural structure on both sides of the colonnades didn't obscure the actors' performances, and the actors' performances were able to be coherent. If placed in a space with a high degree of enclosure, the actors' movements and action trajectories would have been obscured, and perhaps such spatial scheduling would not have been possible.

### **2.2 Being Close to Reality, with Realistic and Freehand Combination**

Lin Huiyin's stage art adopted the principle of realism; regardless of whether it was limited by the theater or not, she strived for realism and the combination of realism and freehand creation. It was not the first time that this kind of stage art appeared, but Lin Huiyin's grasp of details was rare at the time. Whether it was a large overall scene or small detailed props, Lin Huiyin tried her best to restore the authenticity of the scenes on the stage settings. In the creative works for Yale University, the European-style sofa seats, floor-to-ceiling round-arched windows, classical oil paintings and other European elements in the space immediately brought the audience to the American home environment. In "Design and Behind-the-Scenes Difficult Problems", Lin Huiyin recalled, "In one scene of the living room of an old-fashioned family in the middle of America, there was a "tripod", and a friend and I walked all over New Haven for three days".

The same was true in the design of "The Madman of Money". The presence of common architectural elements in the scenes, such as verandas and pavilions, white stone handrails and marble wall screens, brought a realistic style to the audience. And the colors, decorations, and mottled textures involved all had freehand characteristics. In particular, the act design of Yale University emphasized the symmetry of the picture, making the stage restrained and balanced. And the circular shape in the middle broke the serious atmosphere brought by all straight lines, and the points, lines, and surfaces echoed each other in an organic fusion of realism and freehand creation.

### **2.3 Changeful Spatial Scheduling**

Drama can take place in any space. How to use the space and transformation constitutes the property difference of the stage art designers. In a scene, the director needs to make corresponding spatial scheduling for the actors according to the spatial characteristics of the scene and the needs of the performance, using the different position changes and performance trajectories of the actors in different spaces to illustrate character relationships or explain the spatial environment and adjust the rhythm of the performance. The scheduling of actors in the in-picture space covers three dimensions: front and back, left and right, and up and down, and needs to be designed according to the position movement of the actors. Although this kind of scheduling has a lot of room for free rein, it is also limited by objective conditions such as scene space, and Lin Huiyin, as an architect, naturally knew how to "create" in space.

In Yale's drama works, a floor-to-ceiling window was opened at the center of the theater, breaking the limitation of the "wall" and extending the theater space. Every audience could imagine what was behind the window, and this extension reached infinitely distant. In addition, it balanced the picture and presented a harmonious and symmetrical aesthetic as a whole. The side wall was also opened with a door, which facilitated the actors' access. The design of the door and window broke the confines of the space and increased the possibilities of performance scheduling for the director and the actors.

## **3. THE CONCEPT OF GREY SPACE IN ANCIENT CHINESE ARCHITECTURE**

### **3.1 *The Concept of Grey Space and Its Cultural Connotation***

In fact, related theoretical studies on "grey space" have emerged from a long time ago, and the most well-known one is the "grey space" theory derived from the "metabolism" theory and symbiosis thought proposed by Kisho Kurokaya as a representative. This theory was proposed in 1960. The "metabolism" school believed that buildings and cities were not static, but constantly changing. They introduced the concept of biology into the field of architecture and gave life to buildings and cities. In the 1980s, Kisho Kurokaya proposed the idea of symbiosis, which was the core idea of his architectural theory and the source and foundation of the "grey space" theory. Most of the modern discussions on "grey space" are about the use of "grey space" in modern architecture and "grey space" in landscape.

From the meaning of the word, it is not difficult to see that grey is derived from the field of color. If color is used as a metaphor for space, indoor space is called "black space" and outdoor space is called "white space", then "grey space" is a transitional space between indoors and outdoors. It belongs neither indoors nor outdoors, but has some characteristics of both indoor and outdoor spaces. It has the transparency and openness of outdoor space and some functional characteristics of indoor space. The existence of "grey space" blurs the boundary between spaces to a certain extent, and penetrates two or more spaces into an organic whole. It can be said that it is an intermediary space and a fuzzy space.

### **3.2 *The Main Expression Patterns of Grey Space in Ancient Chinese Architecture***

The formation and development of "grey space" in ancient Chinese architecture was inseparable from the traditional wooden structure system of Chinese architecture. In the ancient Chinese wood structure system, the walls didn't play a major load-bearing role, but only played a supplementary role in maintaining the wood structure. Compared to Western architecture, where the walls played a major load-bearing role, ancient Chinese architecture was more likely to have a more flexible and diverse "grey space". In this paper, the term

"grey space" refers to the intermediary space with spatially transitional nature in classical Chinese gardens, which can be an independent architectural space with practical functions, or a "broad" space form combined with plants, water bodies, and terrains. Compared with the "grey space" in modern architecture, the "grey space" in ancient Chinese architecture attached more importance to the landscaping part and emphasized the interaction and integration with the natural environment, often creating a leisurely, elegant and relaxed spatial atmosphere to meet the spiritual needs above the spatial function. It specifically included pavilions, windows, pavilions on terraces, corridors, courtyard gate space, courtyard space and steps, etc.

#### **4. THE GREY SPATIAL ATTRIBUTES OF ANCIENT CHINESE ARCHITECTURE PRESENTED IN LIN HUIYIN'S STAGE ART CREATION**

##### **4.1 Transition**

Transition was one of the most important attributes presented by Lin Huiyin's borrowing grey space of ancient Chinese architecture. Transition can effectively deal with the relationship between space and space: it can transition the indoor space to the outdoor and introduce the outdoor scenery into the indoor; it can link several spaces together to form a whole, constituting a fully functional and more superior and reasonable environment. On the other hand, doors, windows, trees and plants are used to link the spaces, thus making the whole present a "separated but not isolated" spatial state. "If the view outside is vulgar, you can try to block it; if it is beautiful, you should try to borrow it for your own use", which not only ensures the benign and effective interaction between spaces, but also makes the transitional "grey space" functionally complementary to indoor and outdoor spaces. Finally, the transitional "grey space" shows a certain spatial vitality. This is also the spatial advantage of the transitional "grey space".

##### **4.2 Ambiguity**

In "Spider Web and Plum Blossom", Lin Huiyin mentioned her view of the classical Chinese corridors, side halls and courtyards: "First, it is a physical space, composed of lakes, mountains, waters and woods, existing in the real world; second, the physical space is a certain

psychological object form of man, whose structural imagery expresses the pattern of a specific psychological space and the relationship between specific psychological emotions and social ethics; finally, it is a social cultural space, a space of illusion produced by traditions and institutions. It is in the phenomenon and beyond the reality. It is a 'field of imagination' that bridges and crosses the boundary between reality and dream, and life and death. The spatial forms presented by grey space are flexible and diverse, and can be integrated and penetrated with the surrounding space, so sometimes the definition of space is ambiguous and uncertain. The spatial separation through obstructions is real with unreality, unreal with reality, seemingly separated but not separated, and seemingly transparent but not transparent. In some cases, it is an external space for the internal absolute space and an internal space for the external absolute space, so it is a relative space range. For example, "a veranda, an attic, a tea table and a vase" presented in Lin Huiyin's works explain very well that there is no clear spatial boundary for their performance scenes. But it is also this ambiguity and uncertainty that brings more possibilities and spatial vitality to the grey space.

##### **4.3 Richness**

More often than not, Lin Huiyin was an architect, so she was rational and calm, and her spatial consciousness was ahead of her time. She was able to realize that a space can provide a unique context for the unfolding of beauty, and saw the "grey space" of ancient Chinese architecture as a living and culturally valuable artwork. The richness it shows is reflected in many aspects: first of all, the expression patterns of "grey space" in Chinese ancient architecture are very rich. For corridors only, there are several kinds of empty corridors, half corridors, compound corridors, whose architectural structure and scale have their own design norms and principles and have their own characteristics. The richness of Chinese ancient architecture "grey space" is also reflected in the diversity of their own spatial functions, and many ancient buildings "grey space" have two or more use functions. In the very beginning, the pavilion served as a place to rest on the road. Now, the pavilion has become a kind of decorative architecture; in a garden, pavilions are often set on the top, making themselves scenes to be enjoyed by visitors, which can make the finishing point for the scenes, with the role of introducing scenes and pointing views. At the same time, the pavilion also

provides the function of enjoying the scenery, because it is transparent all around and can obtain an open view, which is convenient for people to have a panoramic view, and setting tables and chairs in the pavilion provides a space for leisurely enjoying the scenery, which can be called that "The infinite scenery of rivers and mountains is all in one pavilion". Many places in classical gardens are equipped with corridors, which are extensions of indoor spaces and also connect different garden spaces and buildings, playing the role of transition and bridging space to space and dividing space, either curved or straight, with great changes and rhythms. In addition to providing the basic traffic function, due to the transparent spatial structure, pedestrians can also enjoy the scenery of outdoor space at any time when walking through eaves pliers. At the same time, the roof supported has the function of keeping out wind and rain and sun protection.

Since ancient times, ancient architecture is not only a carrier of space but also a carrier of culture, and it is the external embodiment of the Chinese concept of patriarchal clan system, feudal ethical code, feudal hierarchy and the idea of yin and yang. Therefore, Chinese ancient architecture "grey space" also has a rich cultural connotation and exudes a variety of classical Chinese implications.

## 5. CONCLUSION

As early as during her study abroad, Lin Huiyin devoted herself to saving the art of China, and after her return to China, she also practiced her studies physically. Whether in the field of architecture or literature, she left behind precious essence. It is undeniable that Lin Huiyin has a pioneering example significance as the first Chinese female to formally study stage art in the West. In the era when stage art design was not yet standardized, Lin Huiyin brought back a complete code of stage art design and creative order and participated in the design of many performances, and she could be said to possess a solid foundation and rich experiences. At the same time, the Chinese theatrical environment also entered a new stage: multiple time and space and time and space grouping were used; new quality was presented in the "imagination" of the fate of characters or theatrical atmosphere and the combination of realistic and freehand stage design, which also facilitated the audience's aesthetic acceptance, and the audience's emotional experience was strengthened under the effect of the "collective

unconsciousness", thus accepting and creating the art of drama with the spirit of the times.

When Lin Huiyin died in April 1955, Liang Sicheng personally designed her tombstone. Initially, he proposed four titles on the tombstone he designed for Lin Huiyin, one of which was "stage artist", which showed his recognition of Lin Huiyin's work in the field of stage art. As the first Chinese who studied stage art design, Lin Huiyin has a pioneering significance and exemplary role, and will definitely leave a deep mark in the history of Chinese stage art.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is independently completed by Xiaoyu Qu.

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