



Research Article

Threads of unity: the transcultural tapestry of Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui's contemporary dance and theatrical production "Sutra"¹

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Abstract

The article deals with the transcultural connections in choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, artist Antony Gormley, and composer Szymon Brzóska's production "Sutra", the main character of which tries to study Chinese martial arts, Buddhism and share European culture with them. scientific research contributes to developing the multidisciplinary research of modern choreography in general. The importance of research is determined by filling the gap that exists in terms of interdisciplinary research of painting and choreography. The purpose of the study is to study the points of intersection of European and Eastern culture in the "choreographic score", sets, and music. This goal implies studying the following sub-problems: to establish the relationship between the symbolic choreographic language of the "Sutra" and Chinese painting; to research the fusion of elements of ancient Chinese martial arts and avant-garde choreography; to investigate how the main character of the spectacle modernizes the choreography language with techniques of ancient martial arts. The research, undertaken from a historical perspective, encompasses descriptive, comparative, and critical scientific analysis methods. The research is based on the choreographic production itself and media reviews. Based on the set goals, the analysis process will be conducted in two phases: (1) determining the main idea and goal of the production. An exploration of how the main character tries to study Eastern culture, and martial arts philosophy; (2) to study how the play's authors reflected the differences and coincidences between Western and Eastern cultures in the choreographic narrative. It is the research on these issues that constitutes the scientific novelty of the article. In the conclusions, it is emphasized that the performance combines European choreography, and scenography, with the features of Chinese painting and martial arts. It is determined that the European traveller tries to harmoniously combine oriental martial arts and European choreography. Sets and music play a huge role in conveying the idea of intercultural connections. Brzóska expressed the poetics of martial arts with romantic music while the fighting spirit of monks with minimalist music. Considering the findings and results obtained in the research, this masterpiece of choreography is recommended to be included in courses on the history of dance and choreography.

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Introduction

The article deals with the intercultural connections in choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui (Direction and choreography), artist Antony Gormley (visual creation and design, sets and costumes), composer Szymon Brzóska's

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contemporary choreographic dance production “Sutra” (2008, Ali Thabet—Assistant Choreographer, Leila Ransley—Tour Wardrobe Manager, Adam Carrée—Lighting Consultant), that was premiered at London’s performing arts venue—Sadler’s Wells Theatre (Cherkaoui, 2021: 1).³

As Media reporter Ma Yue states “Sutra” made its debut in China late after the European premiere and 240 performances around the whole world (Ma, 2019: 1). According to Sidi Larbi “I was very curious about how Chinese audience would react because ‘Sutra’ is a work about China, and it’s finally coming home after 11 years.” (Ma, 2019: 1). This performance of the Belgian choreographer, who is passionate about ancient Asian culture, yoga, and martial arts, is one of the most interesting productions of the world’s modern choreography.

Coming from the modern Western world to visit Shaolin monks in China, the main character of the play is an outsider who tries to enrich his knowledge of Chinese martial arts, and Zen Buddhism philosophy. Then he tries to introduce Western culture to the monks, but the ultimate goal of the hero’s voluntary journey is self-perfection, spiritual growth, and changing his worldview. “The warrior monks performing in Sutra are from the Shaolin Temple situated near Songshan Mountain in the Henan Province of China and established in 495 AD by monks originating from India. In 1983, the State Council defined the Shaolin Temple as the key national Buddhist Temple” (Muggleton, 2020: 16).

The traveller wishes to break the stereotype of separating the world into two polar parts—the Western and Eastern and perceive it as a whole. The latter is the natural state of world perception, which is reached by the refined consciousness of a person. For the intended purpose, the outsider tries to study the Daoist and Confucian teachings, the essence of meditation, Chinese painting, calligraphy, and martial arts. Finally, he is interested in integrating himself into the Eastern world. It is the research on these issues that constitutes the *scientific novelty* of the article.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Data Analysis, gathered according to the issue and object of a scientific paper, was based on thoroughly reviewing the relevant theoretical framework literature and references. The research was conducted through the classification of these sources according to the following principles:

- Group 1: Works on Contemporary ballet and choreography;
- Group 2: Works on Chinese painting esthetics;
- Group 3: Media resources (interviews, reviews, study resources) about the performance.

I will highlight important sources from each group that helped to create the methodological apparatus:

Group 1: “Contemporary Dance History” by Rico Naranjo helped me define the characteristics of modern ballet. The researcher analyzes what constitutes a completely modern perception of the human body in modern choreography. It is the modern perception that is the basis of “Sutra’s” choreography.

In her manual „History of Ballet“, Nana Loria analyzes the modern performance as a meeting place of styles and cultures, which she explains not by choice of professional choreographers, but with the stylistic characteristics of modern choreography. According to her, in modern dance, “the choreographer enters the already existing global choreographic space and contributes to the advancement of a unified artistic process, which combines the civilization’s past and present creative experience” (Loria, 2014: 154). As “Sutra” is a typical example of postmodernist aesthetics, based on the integration of several cultures and epochs, Loria’s assessment became my starting point for the methodology of analysis.

Group 2: While analyzing the “Sutra”, the research process was conducted by determining the main key of the choreographer’s symbolic language. In this term, Alexander Mann’s statements about Chinese painting, as a cultural event of primary importance, served as the key to understanding Chinese spirituality in general.

³ A recording of choreographic show is available on Vimeo; see SUTRA—Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui + Shaolin Monks - 少林功夫 - Sadler’s Wells Theatre - 佛经 (2017). See <https://vimeo.com/202670621>

The psychological function of Chinese painting is discussed in Sergei Voronin's candidate thesis. The researcher determines painting as the universal form of artistic creativity that is directed towards harmonizing man and environment. This very feature is the basis of the whole production of Sidi Larbi's "Sutra".

The valuable findings about the idea of wandering, which causes the enlargement of the imaginable space beyond the Chinese so-called handscroll can be found in Yaroslav Kovalevski's candidate thesis. These features of Chinese canvas are evident in "Sutra"—the choreographer activates the consciousness of the audience, who begins a journey into the world of imagination and fantasy.

The issue of utilizing the space as well as the significance of symbols in Chinese canvas are highlighted as the main problems of Scholar Irina Sheptunova's research. The same method of utilization of space and symbolism can be observed in "Sutra".

Thus, articles and books of Mann, Kovalevski, and Sheptunova provided me with a theoretical framework when searching several coincidences of Chinese painting with the staging of "Sutra".

Group 3: The study source (for teachers and students) about the production of "Sutra" helped with the research process as it contained interviews and base information about the staging team, production, temple traditions in Henan province, Shaolin monks and their daily schedule, the style of Kung fu.

The problem of cultural bridges led to the fusion of ancient Asian culture and the Western post-industrial era of technologies is discussed in Burt's and Duguid's reviews.

Dance critic Claudia La Rocco and researcher Sissi Liu focus on the issue of enrichment of Sidi Larbi's choreography with tricks of Martial arts, which led to the new hybrid genre.

La Rocco mentions Shaolin monks as "Warrior-Dancer Monks", who managed to transform combat movements into dance.

Sissi Liu discusses Sutra as an epoch-making movement theatre production in which Shaolin monks and European collaborators created the new artistic genre of contemporary dance—the inaugural piece of "kung fu dance theatre" (Liu, 2018: 192). Even though there is significant domination of the number of scenes with kung fu tricks, the scholar states that the ontological realm of kung fu is expanded. The scholar explores how the collaborative process obscured boundaries between kung fu and dance, giving rise to a new genre; "Sutra" is a clear example of such a newcomer genre because it combines features of theatre, dance, martial arts, and contemporary movement theatre.

Thus particular research was based on these three types of sources that gave a theoretical framework for comparisons, and descriptive analyses.

The importance of the Study is underscored by several factors:

- filling the gap that exists in research on "Sutra" as an interdisciplinary choreography production with its intercultural links in the modern choreographic language.
- The significance of this research lies in the genre uniqueness of the sutra; The traditions of the 1500-year-old temple in Henan Province, the style of Kung fu, and the philosophy of Zen Buddhism have consistently captured the interest of European artists. However, for the first time in the history of choreography, due to Sidi Larbi's imagination and creativity, Shaolin monks were introduced to the public as dancers, while the techniques of kung fu turned into a potential source for enriching the modern European choreographic language. It is not by chance that Researcher Sissi Liu labels the performance as "kung fu dance theatre: (Liu, 2018: 192) and dance critic Claudia La Rocco refers to Shaolin monks as "Warrior-Dancer Monks" (La Rocco, 2010: 1).
- The relevance of the research is also determined by the second crucial aspect - the choreographic performance conveys a profound philosophical concept given in the form of a rhetorical question—Is it possible to harmoniously merge Western and Eastern cultures in the modern globalized world replete with challenges, even as these cultures exhibit openness to foreign assimilation and Great desire to interact?

Scientific research contributes to the development of the multidisciplinary research of modern choreography in general, and particularly "Sutra".

Problem of Study

The main problem is to study the points of intersection of European and Eastern cultures as well as to determine the symbols of Eastern and Western cultures in the “choreographic score”, sets and costumes, and music.

This goal implies to study the following **sub-problems**:

- to determine the interdisciplinary character of the performance
- to determine the specific elements of avant-garde choreography used in the production
- to establish a relationship between the symbolic choreographic language of the “Sutra” and Chinese monochrome painting
- to research the fusion of elements of ancient Chinese martial arts and avant-garde choreography
- to determine the specifics of the spectacle’s dramaturgy
- to research how the main character of the spectacle modernizes the techniques of Chinese martial arts with elements of modern choreography
- to establish the role of music in the creation of the “choreographic score”, which in turn plays a major role in the unfolding of the idea of intercultural connections of the production.

Method

This research, undertaken from a historical perspective, encompasses descriptive, comparative, divinatory, qualitative, and critical scientific **analysis methods**. The research is based on the choreographic production itself and internet media reviews.

Based on the set goals and objectives, the process of analysis will be conducted in two phases: The first phase is determining the main idea of the work, which is conveyed by the autobiographical narrative of the traveller. An exploration of how the main character tries to study Eastern culture, the essence of meditation, and the philosophy of martial arts, with their religious aspects. The second phase; is to study how the play’s authors identify and harmonize the differences between Western and Eastern cultures, and then how this is reflected in the choreographic narrative.

Result and Discussion

The plot and main idea of the “Sutra”

The choreographic play “Sutra” deals with the thought-provoking problem of intercultural connections focused on the story of a European traveller who visits China to expand his worldview, learn about a new culture, and find points of intersection between Western and Eastern cultures. Outsider’s hosts are 10 years-old child monk and seventeen adult Shaolin warrior monks, who master meditation techniques for spiritual and physical perfection.



Image 1. 10 years-old child monk and seventeen adult Shaolin warrior monks (Web 1)

They follow a Zen Buddhist doctrine, Kung-Fu, and Tai Chi martial arts that are an integral part of monks’ daily regime, which equally involves the discipline of both, mind and body. “Perhaps, the Shaolin martial arts are not

intended for fighting but rather for mental self-cultivation. Perhaps, the Shaolin monks are not training their bodies for battle; rather they are cultivating their minds for spiritual awakening” (Shahar, 2020: 14).

Many parts of the play depict the daily life of the Shaolin monks when after the traditional morning Buddhist ritual, they begin kung fu exercises with fists and weapons: a long staff weapon—a Chinese Gun and a sword—long Pudaο. At the end of the performance, the traveller from the West and the Shaolin monks try to find the connecting bridges between their cultures and present an organic fusion of Western modern choreography, athleticism, hip hop, gymnastics, and ancient traditional Eastern martial art techniques as a harmonious whole (Burt, 2010: 1).

The inseparability of these diverse streams has a hypnotic effect on the viewer (Numeridanse, 2014: 1).

The main idea of the choreographic play—the search for points of intersection between Western and Eastern cultures, is fully revealed in the play, which is determined not only by the rich artistic imagination and professionalism of the creative team but also primarily by their personal experience. The trip to China was of great importance for the choreographer. Extracts from an innovative Belgian choreographer’s diary show that he found inspiration in the mountain temple of the Shaolin monks: “I made two visits to the temple last summer and it had been a big surprise. It was very beautiful, set on a mountainside, but it wasn’t exactly as I had imagined. The monks were talking on mobile phones, they were allowed pop music, and an internet connection was close by. They told me this was natural, as the Shaolin have always been on top of new technology. Back when paper was first invented, they adopted it very quickly. This openness was good for me because it meant the monks were receptive to my ideas” (Mackrell, 2008: 1).

After visiting Indian monasteries, artist Anthony Gormley is also fascinated by Asian culture, yoga, and the art of meditation. He travelled to India and the Dominion of Ceylon (from 1972—Sri Lanka) to learn much more about Buddhism from 1971–1974 (Duguid, 2008: 1). Like the choreographer, Anthony Gormley wants to show us the place of Western man in a quiet Eastern spiritual monastic environment.

The structure of the “choreographic score”

The performance consists of 18 separate parts, which are connected by the principle of contrast. Relatively passive choreographic sections depicting landscapes of nature are alternated with either sections conveying the thoughts and introverted nature of outsider traveller or sections depicting Chinese martial art exercises. These sections are titled to depict the main idea of the section: 1. Sword; 2. Pond; 3. Maze; 4. War; 5. Box; 6. Lotus; 7. Boat; 8. Forest; 9. Solo; 10. Monkey; 11. City; 12. Pagodas; 13. Animals; 14. Dormitory; 15. Dominoes; 16. Wall; 17. Temple; 18. Courtyard (Mugleton, 2020: 34/35).

The performance is an artistic space for meeting and mutual influence of different cultures and traditions

Interculturalism is manifested in many directions in the play. First of all, the title of the play is noteworthy. It contains a hint of a link to something. The title of the production prompts us to explore transcultural links, as the etymology of the word “Sutra” is related to the Sanskrit meaning: “woven”. It is known that the sutras represented a special type of literary composition, short aphoristic statements. These narratively autonomous handwritten painted sutras were united into a collection of threads woven mostly from palm leaves, which is a hint to the close connection of Chinese sutras with nature.

It should be emphasized here that the play draws attention not only to the mutual influence of two cultures but also to the issues of the synthesis of innovation and tradition as well as their relationship. Little has changed in the rituals and traditions of the Shaolin Temple and the monastic way of life since its inception. Therefore, the relationship between the representative of the modern Techno century from the West and the Shaolin monks goes into the “dialogue” between the modern Techno era and the era of the formation of ancient traditions that are millennium-old. The artist of the play symbolically expressed this detail in the sets as follows.

Twenty one human-sized plywood boxes symbolize historical antiquity, and the only “anomaly” of the scene—an aluminum box is an attribute of the techno-century, which symbolizes the intrusion of a foreign body into the disciplined monastic life. According to Antony Gormley, it is this futuristic aesthetic box that reminds us of a completely different post-industrial era of technologies (Duguid, 2008: 1).

On stage, the audience watches the various movements of the monks' ancient martial training and Cherkaoui's non-hierarchical choreography, characteristic of modern Western ballet dance. (Eastman, 2010: 1) Significantly, Chinese martial arts are also characterized by speed and the alternation of relatively fast and slow techniques, and modern choreography is also characterized by amazing speed and constant rhythmic changes (Naranjo Rico, 2010: 1).

The most thought-provoking and challenging thing for the European choreographer was to transform the combat movements into dance. He saw the potential of choreography in the techniques of Chinese martial arts and tried to make these movements compatible with modern dance techniques. The choreographer explains this process as follows—"For me, Kung Fu became a classical dance language, that is how I looked at it and it made it very acceptable suddenly. It was a big shift in my head because when I worked on this piece I suddenly realized how dance was limiting itself by not understanding that these other forms are also part of its family" (Muggleton, 2020; 19).

Music as a sound method of intercultural connections

The composer of the show—Szymon Brzóska, a graduate of the Music Academy in Poznań and the Royal Flemish Conservatory in Antwerp exhibits a creative interest in projects that explore the mutually enriching connections between various art fields. Szymon Brzóska's primary focus lies in the intersection of music, cinema, and contemporary dance, leading him to engage in collaborative art projects. His cooperation with choreographers—Sidi Larbi and David Dawson is of outstanding importance. Szymon Brzóska demonstrates his commitment to the interdisciplinarity of art fields and actively collaborates with several dance companies across Amsterdam, Buenos Aires, Berlin, Gothenburg, New York, and Madrid. His music has been performed at several dance festivals and venues at the Sydney Opera House, Brooklyn Academy of Music (New York City), Esplanade in Singapore, Sadler's Wells Theatre (London), Lincoln Centre (New York City), and the Festival d'Avignon (Avignon).

Szymon Brzóska who is influenced by the minimalist music of Arvo Part, American minimalists Steve Reich and John Adams, is mostly well-known for creating music for dance, that is based on synergy between music and movement.

Due to the complete congruence of the idea and the compositional idea, performances decorated with Brzóska's music are successfully staged all over the world.

He collaborated with famous choreographers (Vladimir Malakhov, Maria Pages, David Dawson), and dance companies such as Eastman, Het Nationale Ballet, Cedar Lake Company, and Semperoper Ballett (Muggleton, 2020: 13). "His musical language can be placed somewhere between contemporary avant-garde and expanded tonality with a touch of minimalism, yet is deeply rooted in the very tradition of the classical music" (Muggleton, 2020: 13).

Szymon Brzóska creates an organically adapted rhapsodic score for the play.

The ensemble of musicians (2 violins, cello, piano, and percussions: Triangle, Tam-Tam, Temple blocks) follows the choreographic narrative with a live performance as the recorded music is not suitable for "Sutra" (Muggleton, 2020: 23).



Image 2. Live performance of the musicians behind a semi-opaque screen (Web 2)

Separate samples/sections for different scenes combine trends of avant-garde, minimalism, and lyrical embodiment of romantic music.

The music score is represented by autonomous samples for separate scenes. The titles of each of them convey the character of an entire scene and are intended to symbolize choreographic ideas. The 18 music samples are presented in the following order: 1. the sword/Cadenza I; 2. Strings; Cadenza II (drunk monks); 3. Machine music; The Maze, 4. The dragon; 5. Slow down (Sigh language); 6. The Lotus flower/Barocco; 7. Redemptio (Redemption); 8. The fight; 9. Inside the box/solo box Cadenza; 10. Monkey canon; 11. The child; Pagodas; 12. Flowing I (animal solos); the coffins; 13. Flowing I; machine music (the same sample as for the third section—Maze; 14. The dorm; the dolphin (Tai Chi); 15. Marche Funebre; 16. Building the Wall/moving Wall Cadenza II; Flowing II; Dichotomy (building the temple, bars 1-31); 17. Dichotomy (building the temple, bars 32-49); Ultima Forsan: 18. Praying.

Thanks to various stylistic streams, music in turn intensifies the feeling of intercultural and epochal dialogue and plays a major role in opening the idea of interculturalism embedded in the performance. The art of Eastern meditation, the inner peace of monks during a religious ritual, and the thoughts of an outsider are conveyed through slow romantic, melancholic music, while the inner motility of Eastern martial arts is expressed through fast tempo and minimalist European music. All this forms the “rhythmic poetry” of the work.

In the sections of “Sutra” that convey the outsider’s thoughts and self-absorption, the composer favors the timbre of the violin. The solo violin is the only instrument in the following music samples: Cadenza1 (The Sword cadenza); Cadenza II (Drug Monks); Solo Box cadenza; and Moving Wall cadenza. The use of a single instrument is compensated by the additional colors of violin playing techniques ponticello and glissando almost in all the above-mentioned sections. Seems a European outsider emphasises his identity through this popular European instrument that always symbolizes the intimacy of personality.

The composer uses the allusion method, whose purpose is to remind us of either Asian or European musical sound analogies. So, for example, the music for the 11th Section Music titled “The Child” is written in the style of an American Christmas movie or music for Christmas commercials.

Although the scenes depicting the training of fighters are accompanied by a relatively active, March-like nature of music, the latter seems to reduce the militarism of military combat techniques and focuses on the balance achieved between the monks’ inner peace of mind, and physical strength, which is the goal of their daily training. It is significant to emphasize that the composer’s goal was not to use the elements of Chinese traditional music, but to create an atmosphere of oriental culture without any citation. In one of his interviews, he emphasized that he avoided predictable formulas of Chinese music but kept the spirit of Chinese music. According to composers, he was using “certain melodic patterns, or techniques (like glissandi) that could refer slightly to the traditional Chinese music

although my aim was never really to copy any particular style” (Muggleton, 2020: 23). To give the music an authentically specific, local and exotic sense, he used Chinese instruments. According to the composer: “We used some percussion instruments from China, from the temple, to be specific,” he said. “But it was more about creating an atmosphere. The strings helped me to create the harmony I wanted, and the piano brings in rhythm, too” (Ma, 2019: 1). By the way, it should be noted that the musical score is so clear and simple that it evokes associations exactly with Chinese monochrome canvases; Szymon Brzóška’s musical landscapes are as bright and plain as the performance scenography (Sets and costumes).

To the extent that the monks’ martial arts exercises are not accompanied by music, the composer’s score is written to create a general atmosphere and does not give the impression of synchronizing with the monks’ movements, instead, the music meticulously reflects the foreign traveller’s sign language in the choreography. According to the study resource—“The idea was to write a score that didn’t interfere too much with the monks’ inner rhythms but rather surrounded them gently, sometimes accentuating the energy following the movement, sometimes creating a certain emptiness while staying in the background.

There are a few moments when the music is very coherent with the movement and those mostly refer to the Foreigner’s character. For the rest, the music follows the general structure of the show more rather than the movement itself. The monks are not used to moving on the music so (apart from a few cues) most of the time the musicians follow them and their pace. That can change from show to show” (Muggleton, 2020: 23). It is not by chance that researcher Sissi Liu labels this production an extraordinary piece in which Shaolin monks are showing Kung fu tricks against the background of “Brzóška’s contemporary music with strong minimalist influence for two violins, cello, piano, and percussion”, thanks to which the performance acquires uniqueness (Liu, 2018: 197).

Thus, Brzóška’s music, which expressed both the martial spirit of the monks and the romantic nature of the outsider, probably made an incredible contribution to the success of the play.

Chinese painting allusions in the play as a main source of interculturalism

The main problem of the research is the following: what is the unconscious influence of Chinese painting on the sets and costumes as well as on the choreography of the play?

The sets and costumes, dramaturgy, and choreography of the play show that the production team is aware of the primary role of painting in the path of spiritual development and self-improvement in the Buddhist world.

In addition to the fact that the Chinese canvas, as a sample of painting, reflects the artistic thinking of the nation, it has a kind of psychological function—to evoke the feeling of happiness given by the feeling of harmony with the human world. According to a researcher of Chinese painting, S. Voronin, it is the genre of landscape that is the universal form of artistic creativity of harmonizing man and the world in China (Voronin, 2009: 7).



Image 3. Dong Qichang: Mountain Landscape, 1617 (Web 3)

Theologian Alexander Mann believed that the first step for a European to get to know Chinese spirituality is to see the landscapes in their painting. For him, landscapes in Chinese painting represented the spiritual roots of general humanity, which are the harbingers of the rapprochement of peoples (Men, 1992: 30).

The points of intersection between performance and Chinese painting can be seen in many ways. Both the sets and costumes of English artist Antony Gormley and Larbi's European choreography are influenced by Chinese painting. Let us consider the unconscious influence of Chinese painting as it manifests itself in this choreographic show.

The idea of wandering

The play conveys the idea of travel, and wandering, which is equally relevant to Eastern and Western cultures; The poetic-musical art of travelling musicians from the Western world constitutes the greatest legacy of the literature of the Western Middle Ages, Renaissance, and Romanticism.

The idea of travel is not alien to Chinese painting either. The point is that the grand landscapes in China were kept in the form of a scroll, and when viewed, it was slowly opened, to activate the viewer's imagination, the presenters focused the viewer's gaze on the white section of the picture. Consequently, the viewer could not perceive the composition painted on the grand canvas as a whole. The observer's imagination was activated and he/she could fantasize in advance in his/her mind what he/she could see next on the canvas. In this way, such an idea of space perception is embedded in the Chinese so-called handscroll painting, which allows the observer to make an imaginary journey through the space of the canvas in his mind. According to a researcher of Chinese painting, Kovalevski, on the Chinese canvas, the composition is organized in such a way that it offers an even larger space beyond the picture frames (Kovalevski 2009: 16).



Image 4.五代辽朝的胡壤: Rest Stop for the Khan (Web 4)

The idea of the whole performance is exactly the realization of the idea of travelling and wandering. According to Sidi Larbi: “It must have been an emotional journey for someone who wanted to be a monk. Everyone had their journey, and I had mine, which carried me there” (Ma, 2019:1).

The Beauty beyond the canvas and spectacle

The following characteristic of Chinese painting is presented in the performance—the pattern of Chinese painting is drawn from imagination, not from nature, which activates the imagination of the observer. Each of the scenes of the play “Sutra” also reflects not real objects and situations from the daily life of Shaolin monks, but the reality brought to life in the author’s imagination. The mystery of the effect of its influence on Chinese painting is hidden not in the beauty of objects, but is revealed in their interpretation, the mechanism of their perception, and answers the question “how we perceive” and not “what we see”. The audience feels the beauty of individual scenes of the play more intensely not while watching the ongoing action, but during reflection and thinking about it. Moreover, many images of new configurations of boxes are born in the imagination of the audience until they see it on the stage.

How do the authors of the play activate the audience’s imagination? the scenography of the play is as relaxed as possible, which is generally the main feature of the style of Antony Gormley.

On the stage, there is one type of set (boxes) expressing the aesthetics of minimalist sets, but when the audience looks at examples of the multi-functional use of these boxes, their imagination is also active, as new objects are born in their mind before constantly new configurations of the boxes appear on the stage in front of them in reality. Thus, beauty is born in the imagination of the viewer.

Human-sized white boxes carved out of spruce tree material turned into an existentially relevant object. These white boxes are constantly moved around the stage by the performers who give them the function of different things or objects. It is this process that activates the viewers’ imagination, as a result of which it is easier for them to see in their mind a new object, thing, or subject a few seconds before the next configuration of boxes is completed on the stage. So, for example, The various geometric configurations include a cell, a sarcophagus, a bed, a mass grave, a table, a boat, a lotus flower, dominoes, a hideout, a dragon, a Pagoda, a Great Wall of China and others.

According to the choreographer, since 2005 he “started developing a new type of work where the objects or the scenographic elements could be re-organized not only to generate new shapes but also new spaces, so suddenly you are in a graveyard or a temple or you are in front of a wall or stairs. It would all just be part of re-organizing the Lego blocks and suddenly you would be somewhere else” (Muggleton, 2020:9).

The scenography of the performance was created by building various constructions with boxes, like children’s toy Legos, and the choreographic score by utilizing the inner space of these empty boxes, including it in choreographic plasticity. According to the choreographer—“We experimented with the boxes to see what we could create with them. If they would just stand there or lie there, and sometimes we just put them next to each other or pushed them. For the Dominoes section, for example, the child monk, Dong Dong, was just climbing over the boxes, and it felt like we could make one long row of them just suddenly arriving there. We experimented with people being inside them. We built up the ideas together from scratch. We tried to see how many people could fit into one box and that kind of gave this effect to the boat. Then we thought that they could jump off from another situation into that box so it looked like you had to jump from land into that boat. So those were certain images that we felt spoke to us and it was really step by step that themes emerged” (Muggleton, 2020: 18).

Thus, the choreographer of the performance activates the consciousness of the audience, who begins a journey into the world of imagination and fantasy.

The expansion of artistic space and the attempt to overcome its framework in “Sutra”, as the influence of the wide spatial capacity of the Chinese canvases

In Chinese painting, it’s important to go beyond what you see on the canvas and watch a larger artistic space. This is a kind of test for the viewer—can we go beyond the limited boundaries of the canvas frame and imagine additional landscapes expanding our limited imagination? The choreographic performance “Sutra” also offers us an amazing expansion of the stage space and activation of the imagination.

So, for example, in the dream scene of the monks in the tiered dorm (scene N14. Dormitory), Gormley's most powerful scene, the human-sized boxes give us a hint about the world within a world (Burt, 2010: 1).

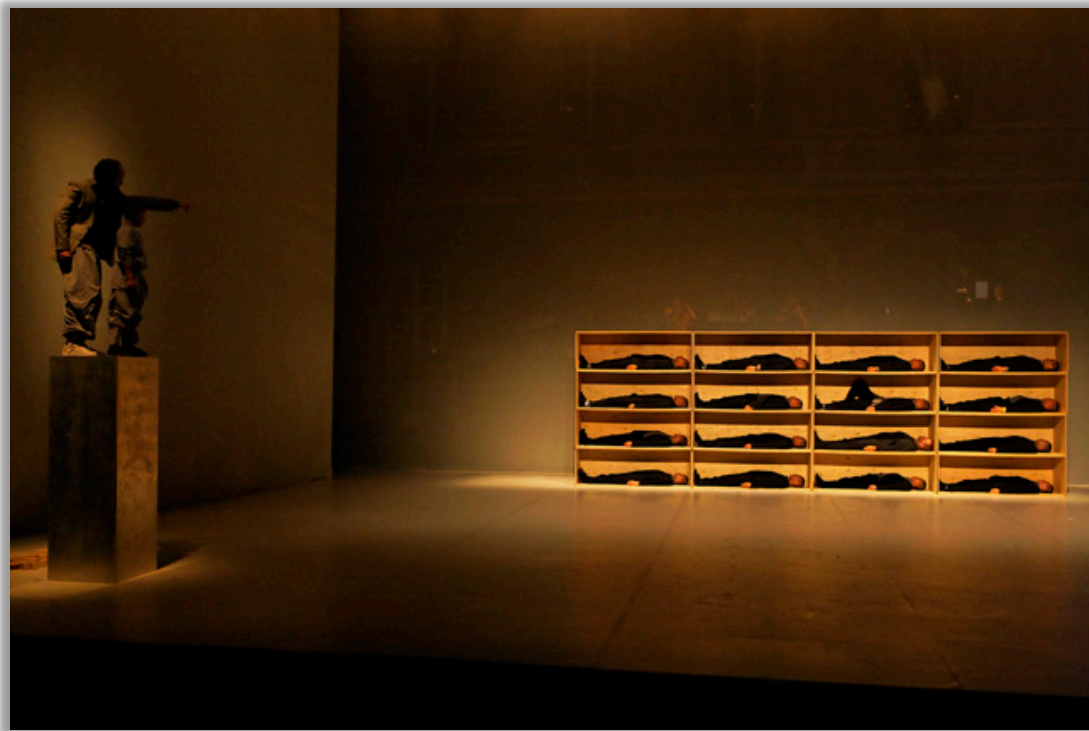


Image 5. Dormitory, photo of Christophe Raynaud de Lage (Web 5)

Since movement in the box is limited, the monks try to overcome this mass limitation by hitting the boxes with their hands or feet from the inside. The action of the people placed in it is a test proposed by the choreographer—how will we accept the limitation? will we try to overcome it? will we turn the micro space into the macro world? Sidi Larbi explained his attitude to the symbolic meaning of boxes' limited space—"There is one short solo that I do in the middle where I am inside a box and one of the monks suggests, "Why don't you try it too, to live within this?" and then you realize how hard it is to express yourself within a space that is so limited. I try to dance a whole solo that in my eyes speaks of loneliness, being caught within yourself. If you really put yourself out there, you are also confronted by yourself and your own limits. It's a very interesting thing to be in a box, to be put in a box by others because I feel we all put each other in boxes" (Mugleton, 2020: 19).

The idea and concept conveyed by symbols

As in Chinese painting, symbolic thinking is highlighted in this play. As it is well-known, in Chinese painting, various figures depicted on the canvas have symbolic meanings—teacher, apprentice, pine tree, moon, flower, and others. According to scholar I. Sheptunova, the figure in Chinese painting is a kind of tuning fork raised to the level of a symbol, a telling detail, and the key to the content of the picture (Sheptunova, 1987: 138).

The artist Antony Gormley reduced the decoration of the performance to a minimum, thereby increasing its symbolic weight.

The symbolic meaning of the box should be highlighted separately, they have the greatest function in the "choreographic score". Actors will "wear" these boxes on their bodies as a kind of cloth, due to which these dancing boxes have lost the function of decoration and are perceived as an organic component of body plastic. According to the choreographer—"Also in Sutra the monks have to relate to objects, which became part of the movement as well. Moving the boxes around, and having them slide or fall, they were part of the choreography, as well as the sticks and swords. It's great to realize we can use objects to dance with, to just go beyond your own body" (Mugleton, 2020: 19).

We should also highlight the symbolism of the flower, which is of great importance in Chinese culture as well as in the performance of “Sutra”. In ancient collections of Chinese poems and songs, the flower is a metaphor for beauty. According to the researcher Uday Dokras, Buddhism considered it to be among eight amazingly important symbols.

According to a legend, lotus flowers appeared everywhere after the first steps made by Gautama Buddha in his childhood (Dokras, 2020:10).

The choreographer gave great importance to the lotus flower, recognized as a symbol of purity in Chinese painting and culture. A boy sitting on a flower bud is meditating, and monks sitting on flower petals are praying, which “evokes the association of the incarnation of the Buddha surrounded by monks” (Vaghi, 2013: 1).

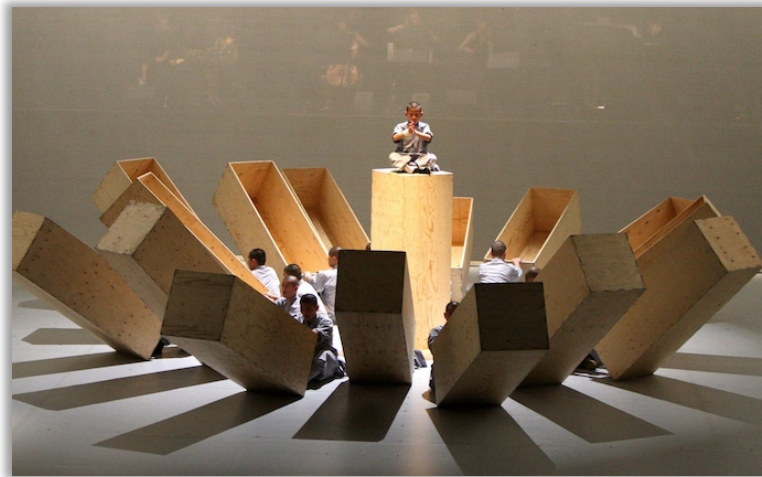


Image 6. A child monk sitting on a Lotus flower meditating (Web 6)

Thus, the aesthetics of the symbolism depicted in the “Sutra”, can be linked both to the influence of Chinese painting and the aesthetics of modern Western contemporary scenography, which is characterized by a lack of sets on the theatre stage in the era of the boom of multimedia.

The specifics of utilizing the stage space

In the play, the choreographer and the artist occupy only a small part of the stage space, which also connects the play with the Chinese canvas, on which the figures occupy a relatively small part of the space and there are many necessary voids on the canvas. Both the void left on the canvas and the unfilled space of the stage enhance the viewer’s imagination.

The “Sutra”, unloaded from decoration sets, is a sample of scenographic laconism. The only decoration—the boxes are placed on the stage mostly asymmetrically, and often a certain section of the stage (even more than half) remains fully empty, which creates the illusion that the action takes place on a half-empty stage.

Psycho-emotional load of a white colour

When grandiose Chinese landscapes preserved in the form of a scroll were shown to the viewer, the canvases were slowly unfolding on a white section, because white colour was assigned a special psycho-emotional load.

The artist of the “Sutra” Antony Gormley uses exactly white lights, white clothes, and white boxes for Sets and costumes. It is significant to emphasize that the total monochrome of the performance resonates both with Chinese painting and with the aesthetics of one of the currents of Western art—minimalism.

Rejection of the principle of theatrical dramaturgy

If we recall the long Chinese scrolls, different landscapes one after the other are drawn on them that are not related to each other meaningfully or causally, which creates contrasts.

By the way, even the ancient Chinese sutras lack a narrative plot (Burt, 2010: 1). The dramaturgy of the “Sutra”, in which the cause-and-effect links are less pronounced, is not built on the sequential opening of the narrative. According to Ma Yue, “the work itself doesn’t have a very clear storyline” (Ma, 2019: 1). Sixteen contrasting sections (images conveyed in the language of dance) are separated by musical-choreographic pauses.

There are contrasts between the Choreographic images, which correspond to the principle of a European musical suite. Sections depicting the thoughts of an introverted, self-absorbed outsider are replaced by the fastest sections of combat training, where amazing synchrony of movements is achieved.

It was not by chance that the performance was rated as a collection of aphorisms or short pictures (Vaghi, 2013: 1).

It is significant that the story-telling with cause-and-effect narrative, which is replaced by the landscapeness, is influenced not only by Chinese painting but also by Western culture:

- The influence of a popular musical genre in European music—the suite, which is also alien to plot's the penetrating development built on the cause-and-effect principle
- The performance expresses the aesthetics of Western avant-garde choreography, which speaks of futuristic trends (aluminum box), the geometry of boxes expressing constructivism, decentralization of stage space, elimination of narrative, and preference for asynchrony of music and dance movements (Naranjo Rico, (2010: 1); There are used the principles of choreography that are typical for modern choreography: isolation—separation of different parts of the body and their independent movement and opposition—the opposite movement of one part of the body to its opposite part (Loria, 2014: 157)
- Due to the dancers' poses (Sidi Larbi and child Shaolin monk), an interesting allusion arises with a bronze sculpture by Auguste Rodin—The Thinker, that brings us closer to Western art.



Video 1. Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, Antony Gormley and Szymon Brzóska (Web 7)

Meditation as a method of thinking

It is a commonly accepted axiom that looking at a Chinese painting should induce a meditative state. Many sections of the “Sutra” also serve to create a meditative mood, because meditateness is the method of the choreographer's artistic thinking. From this point of view, the dance of the boy and the outsider in the aluminum box can be mentioned as one of the fascinating scenes. According to the choreographer's words, being placed in such a small box, that symbolizes monastic cells, stimulates extraordinary spiritual abilities during meditation.

Thus, the choreographic play “Sutra” is full of allusions that unmistakably guide the audience to Chinese monochrome painting.

Thought-provoking finale of “Sutra”—the attempt to harmonize Eastern and Western traditions and cultures

In the finale of the play, Cherkaoui's choreographic alchemy reaches its apogee. He blends and harmonizes elements of Eastern and Western cultures and traditions in “Sutra”. The authors of the play want to break stereotypes about the

incompatibility of Eastern and Western culture, Eastern and Western thinking, as well as tradition and innovation. For this goal, the outsider tries to overcome the artificial barrier constructed in the human mind, which is symbolized in the play by the impenetrability of the Great Wall of China. A very impressive scene in this respect is the dance of the outsider and the child monk in one box as they try to achieve tandem. At the end of the “Sutra”, the mutual sympathies of the representatives of the two worlds are also expressed. According to Ma Yue: “For example, the monks display their kung fu skills wearing Western suits” (Ma, 2019: 1). One more hint to this is the following scene—warriors are sitting on vertically standing boxes, which should symbolize Western skyscrapers and Chinese Pagodas at the same time therefore indicated to the principle of double coding in the performance. According to the choreographer—“The things that are different are only different as long as you don’t absorb each other’s language. Let’s say that the Shaolin monk has a movement that’s different from mine, but the moment I try to learn it then it’s a movement that my body also accepts” (Mugleton, 2020:10).

In the finale, Sidi Larbi sheds light on the main idea of the work—the dialogue between the two worlds, as a matter of fact, has been accomplished. Sherkaoui repeats the tricks of the monks with amazing precision, but the dynamics of the romantic, tonal music miss the dynamics of the movements of the Shaolin monks. The chronotope⁴ of Western-style music does not match the chronotope of an Eastern Tai Chi training scene. Isn’t this a hint that the Eastern martial techniques performed with mathematical precision by a Westerner lack something internal, something that cannot be learned in a few months or years, something that can be explained more by the phenomenon of genetics? He specifies his opinion in this regard in one of the interviews: “My assumptions about China came from Bruce Lee movies I watched in childhood. But later you realize Chinese culture is much more than that” (Ma, 2019: 1). Perception of martial arts techniques of Shaolin monks as an original and completely new language of dance is the result of a European choreographer’s artistic research, but the attitude of the monks to this issue turned out to be also very interesting; As Sidi Larbi recalls in one of the interviews: “they asked me what a choreographer is. I thought that was perhaps the best question I’ve ever been asked” (Ma, 2019: 1).

In the context of intercultural connections, the main essence of “Sutra” reminds me of the main idea of Rudyard Kipling’s poem—“The Ballad of East and West”⁵, where the poet questions universally recognized facts about fundamental differences and the everlasting dichotomy between East and West. The writer sees the solution to this problem in the meeting of gifted and strong individuals who can assist in vanishing differences, transcend boundaries, and bridge the gaps created by cultural, geographical, and social divisions. In “Sutra” these gifted and strong individuals take shape as a traveller from the Western World and Shaolin monks from China.

Conclusion

The opinion about ballet dramaturgy—according to which, it is a synthesis of four types of dramaturgy: theatrical, musical, choreographic, and pictorial (Loria, 2014: 7)—may be expressed in the modern choreography play “Sutra” as well.

Choreography, music, and painting are harmoniously coordinated, which determines that the main ideas of the choreographer and the concept of the performance are presented very clearly, which even causes the admiration of the audience.

During the research, it was determined the following:

- There is a lack of scientific literature available on the subject of the Sutra;

⁴ The term is used with the same meaning as it has been introduced by A. A. Ukhomsky his physiological research in 1925 (Zueva 2015: 30), then cultivated in the humanitarian field by M. M. Bakhtin, and leads to the illusion of overcoming the flow of time (Beaton 2010: 59).

⁵ Rudyard Kipling. “The Ballad of East and West” (1889)

“Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,

Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God’s great Judgment Seat;

But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,

When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth!” (Kipling 1889/1994: 1)

- The authors of the choreographic play “Sutra” want to show the meeting of Eastern and Western cultures, which turns not only into a cultural dialogue but also an epochal one;
- The European traveller tries to harmoniously combine oriental martial arts and modern European choreography techniques, and enrich European culture with elements of older Asian culture;
- The performance combines, on one hand, modern European theatrical thinking, choreography, and scenography, and on the other hand, the principles of Chinese painting, and the features of ancient martial arts. It is clearly stated in the guideline of the “Sutra” that the choreographer learned rituals, movements, and rhythms of the monks of the Shaolin temple, and offered them a contemporary choreography standard made up of other capacities of the body. “This exchange, made into a show on stage, resembles the learning process of a new language, written between East and West, that respects the tradition of kung fu and gives it an original point of view” (Numeridanse, 2014: 1);
- Sets and costumes play the biggest role in conveying the idea of intercultural connections in the play “Sutra”;
- The Sets and costumes and choreography of the performance were greatly influenced by principles of Chinese monochrome painting, which was reflected in the partial use of the stage space, the colour limit of the decorations and scenography, etc.;
- Szymon Brzóska’s musical style combines the peculiarities of avant-garde music, minimalism, and lyrical romantic music, thus symbolizing Western and Eastern worlds: The composer shows the poetics of Eastern martial arts through romantic music, while the fighting spirit of Shaolin monks is emphasized with minimalist music. Thanks to these stylistic layers, Szymon Brzóska in his turn intensified the intercultural and epochal dialogue in “Sutra”;
- We can easily consider Sidi Larbi’s “Dance Odyssey” as a dance of cultures, as an intercultural choreographic production beyond national borders, that is based on the choreographer’s autobiographical experience.

Recommendations

Considering the findings and results obtained in the research and the actual problem of intercultural connections posed in the play “Sutra”, this masterpiece of modern European choreography is recommended to be included in courses on the History of Choreography or the History of Ballet.

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The research paper is dedicated to the memory of Nana Loria, the Georgian musicologist, and author of the first Georgian-language textbook in the history of ballet. She laid the groundwork for the methodology of scientific research in ballet and contemporary dance in Georgia, which greatly aided me in conducting this specific research.

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