

Peer Gynt's Boundary Crossings: The Global Map of His Empirical and Mental Journeys

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Abstract Peer Gynt spends most of his life in the airy atmosphere of dreams and fairytales. He constantly crosses different kinds of real and mental borderlines. In my article I concentrate on three central motifs of the play, which have clear symbolic significations in the original cultural context, and examine the problems one is faced with by using the same images in Chinese productions of the play.

Key words platonic vs. aristotelian ontology; boundary crossings; mountain; self

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Peer Gynt is a traveller in time and space. He is constantly crossing visible and invisible borders without ever finding a place where he finishes transgressing himself. The main obstacle is that Peer's intellectual efforts are directed towards questions concerning "being," in what form ever, but his actions and imaginations lead him into a lifestyle distinguished by rapid changes. Whereas his reflections are captured in a system of Platonic ontology of being, his boundary-crossing activities link him to an Aristotelian ontology of becoming. This contradictory model of a double-tracked existential concept prevents Peer from being able to synchronize the anti-directional movements of his life, which only at the end of the play coincide in a moment of duration.

Instead of facing reality Peer prefers to escape into imagination, with one exception. During his stay in America he starts fleeing from imagination into reality, thereby turning his life from that of a dreamer to that of a business tycoon and a self-made man. It is striking that the gap between act three and four marks the most significant borderline between the one who is dreaming his life and the one who is performing his life. And one should keep in mind that Peer is the only one to inform his listeners about his past, and nobody can be sure that his autobiographic narrations are authentic, it might just as well be that he provides his past with fairy-tale features, thus narrowing the gap between the real and the imagined Peer.

When we take a look at Peer's strategies of escaping we easily recognise that he prefers fairy-tales as his means of conveyance. After the humiliating decline of the Gyntian family Peer's mother resorts to fairy-tales in order to make the situation endurable for herself and her son. The result is that Peer gradually loses his ability to distinguish between fact and fiction. The major part of boundary crossings in *Peer Gynt* depends to a great extent on the fairy-tale structure of the plot, which enables the main figure to abandon the limitations of time and space. Among the significant fairy-tale motifs of the play the following are too glaring to be overlooked: Peer's fight

with the trolls, his numerous confrontations with figures who expose him to temptations and ordeals, his habit of hiding behind the guise of others and his ability to move through the air. It is however striking that the macro-structure of the play is turned into a sort of anti-fairy tale. Peer is not the one who enters the mountain hall in order to liberate the princess. On the contrary, he is seduced and enticed into the mountain by the false princess and finally forced to find his way out again on his own, with assistance of his mother and Solveig. And at the end of the play it is not Peer who saves the princess, but the princess who saves Peer, thus inverting the traditional happy end structure of the fairy tale.

Since folk tales consist of wandering- motifs one may expect to find the same motifs in more or less adapted versions everywhere according to the narrative traditions of changing cultural contexts. At the end of this article I will approach this problem with my point of departure in different symbolic usage of words like “self,” “pig,” and “mountain” in the Norwegian and the Chinese tradition, hereby paying attention to divergent cultural significations and focusing on questions related to problems of sense-making and the transference of symbolic meaning.

As far as I have ascertained the word “border” appears only once in *Peer Gynt*.¹ During his conversations with his guests at the beginning of act 4 Peer claims not to like the notion “break with” because it leaves no possibility for retreat. That’s why “the thought of overstepping the mark/Has always made me a bit cautious” (Ibsen 329), he ironically enough says. Nonetheless he develops a mastery in “overstepping” boundaries in the course of a strategy aiming at avoiding permanency. In the following I will give a short survey of the most obvious expressions of boundary crossings in *Peer Gynt*.

- A: National and language borders: Norway-America, America-Morocco, Morocco-Egypt, Egypt-Norway
- B: Imagined national and language borders: From the respective location to England, Gibraltar, Greece, Turkey, Iraq, China
- C: Cultural and experience boundaries:
 - 1: Bad fortune experiences—Norway
 - 2: Good fortune experiences—America
 - 3: Intellectual experiences—Germany
 - 4: Hardworking and egocentric experiences—England
 - 5: Taste and spiritual experiences—France
 - 6: Hedonistic experiences—Italy
 - 7: Self-defence experiences —Sweden
- D: Spatial boundaries: High-low, earth-air, inside-outside, urban-rural, western-eastern, forwards-backwards
- E: Temporal boundaries: Past-present-future
- F: Landscape boundaries: Valley, mountain, sea, desert, forest
- G: Professional boundaries: Trade, business, shipping, gold digging, trick actor
- H: Social and religious boundaries: negro-white man, tycoon-slave, rich-

- poor, large farmers—high officials—petit bourgeois (lower middle class)—small holders,—craftsmen, Christian-Muslim
- I: Psychological boundaries: sexual urge-love, degradation-sublimation, id-I, self-self enough, passion-confession, self-assertion-humiliation, attraction-rejection, impulsive-reflective
- J: Mental boundaries: Sane-insane, normal-mad, exalted-depressed, appearance-being
- K: Metaphysical boundaries: God-devil, heaven-hell, christianity-paganism
- L: Movement boundaries: Running-riding-dancing-flying-fleeing
- M: Genre boundaries: Dramatic poem, play in the play, narration, song
- N: Subgenre boundaries: Dream play, parable, theatre of the Grotesque, meta-physical drama-satire
- O: Boundaries of poetic expression: Dialogue, monologue, ironic speech, comments, symbolic and allegoric expression

Peer Gynt looks upon himself as a “world citizen.” If we trace Peer’s boundary crossings on a map and project them on a globe, and as the globe turns around the spectator or the theatre director is enabled to plot in different combinations and re-combinations of the main figure’s global itinerary, thereby attaching importance to aspects regarding the global place from which the play and the players are being observed. Because I am publishing in an international journal, I want to draw attention to a topic and two motifs which may cause misunderstandings.

Let me start with the mountain motif, which is very ambivalent and has layers of meaning in Chinese culture and art. Here I will concentrate on those most relevant to Ibsen’s use of the motif, leaving out mountains as places of worship and religious rituals. In *Peer Gynt* the mountain region serves as a setting for the conflict between Peer’s higher and lower self. In most of the scenes he gives way to his animal instincts, but finally he refuses to abolish his human nature. The mountain sceneries are thus a sort of battlefield between two psychic energies, one of which links him to the bright and one of whom links him to the dark side of his psychic spectrum. In this connection it is interesting to notice that the Chinese notions *yin* and *yan* initially were the names for two sides of a mountain. *Yin* represents the dark side of a mountain and *yan* the bright side. Consequently the symbol of *yin-yan* is a circle divided in two parts, one of which is black and the other white. However, in Chinese philosophy the concept of *yin-yan* is not a concept of either-or, but a concept of mediating the contrasts. According to this principle balance and harmony are reached only by means of blending the polarities, not through eliminating the one side at the cost of the other. As far as the mountain due to the *yin-yan* vision of the world is a space where the interactions of polarities take place, there can be no such things as pure evil and pure good, only different kinds of mixtures. Because Chinese and Western approaches to metaphysical questions in that respect differ fundamentally, the use of mountain motifs might be a challenge for the directing of *Peer Gynt* in a Chinese cultural context. Nevertheless, in the Chinese fairytale tradition there is a small selection of narratives

dealing with folkloristic creatures living in caves and grottoes, evoking the notion of an underworld inhabited with beings totally different from those living in the upper world. In Wolfram Eberhard's collection of Chinese fairy-tale types there are two examples of human beings visiting the underworld. The content of the first one is the following: A man makes frequently visits in the underworld; the man invites another man to follow him; he gets lost there and is reborn as a pig; the man doesn't find him any more in the underworld. He returns to the upper world, searches for the newborn pig and slaughters it; He goes back to the underworld and picks up his friend, who has turned to a human being again (Eberhard 199).

In this narrative one easily recognizes the main outlines of Peer Gynt's visit in the hall of the mountain king. During his stay in the underworld Peer gradually merges into a troll provided with the attributes of the pig, the animal tail. Finally he is freed from his existence as a pig, and through the assistance from the outside world he is reborn as a human being.²

By all narrative similarities there is a significant difference between the Chinese and the Norwegian versions of the motif. Whereas the passage through a pig existence in the Chinese version reflects the thinking around the transmigration of souls, the Ibsenian version ascribes to the pig existence a symbolic quality with clear references to sexual urges and the loss of human control. These semantic connotations you will hardly find in the Chinese tradition. On the contrary. In the Chinese narrative and cultural tradition the pig as the twelfth animal in the zodiac represents positive values and brings happiness and good luck. The incompatible semantic use of the word pig marks a cultural difference, which every theatre director has to take into consideration when staging *Peer Gynt*, at least when the intention is to do justice to Ibsen's play.

As a philosophical drama Peer Gynt deals with two different ways of being one's self, both of which are incompatible to each other. This dualistic way of reflecting human existence is however unfamiliar to traditional Chinese philosophy, which emphasises the whole as a system of interconnected parts. Whereas *Peer Gynt* is a play about the two ways of being, the main notion of Taoist thinking is called *the Way* (Tao). According to Taoist understanding *the Way* is a designation for the main direction of all things self-display. Everything has its roots in Tao; consequently everything strives to make Tao's law their own. As distinct from Christian faith the Taoist concept of God lacks the idea of command and control. Metaphysical instances like the thin man and the button moulder, who pursue Peer in order to punish him for having failed to realise God's intention with him, are alien to Taoist thinking. According to my sources Tao has no self that it wants to promote, no goal that it wants to reach. That means you cannot approach Tao through choosing between alternatives, but merely through a process of assimilation, which makes you more Tao-like.

One of the reasons why the Western metaphysical thinking was not influential in classical Chinese culture results to a certain degree from the special character of the Chinese language. Descriptions of classical Chinese language stress the lack of copulative or so called auxiliary verbs. I quote from an article on Chinese thinking: "The Chinese terms usually used to translate 'being' and 'not-being' are *you* (有) and *wu* (无). The Chinese *you* means, not that something 'is' (esse in Latin) in the

sense that it exists in some essential way; it means rather that 'something is present'. 'To be' is to be available, to be around. Likewise, *wu* as 'to not be' means 'not to be around'. Thus the Chinese sense of 'being' overlaps 'having'.³ Regarding this divergent use of the verb one may imagine how difficult it might be to find proper expressions for Ibsen's dialectic of being oneself and being oneself enough in a Chinese context. During the recent centuries the need for finding adequate substitutes for the auxiliary verbs favoured the word *shi*, meaning 'this,' "thus indicating proximity and availability rather than 'existence'" (Hall and Ames 2). It is apparently significant for Chinese thinking that it denies the presumption of essential features and antecedent-determining principles which explain the order of things from a transcendental point of view. Instead classical Chinese thinkers, among them Guo Xiang (ca. 252 – 312 C. E.), preferred to look upon the world as a self-creating process of spontaneous becoming, for which he used the term self-so respectively *so-of-itself* (Brook 91). In Guo's notion of *self-so* "constancy and change are continuous" (Brook 322) and the power of transformation is self-generating within a more or less harmonious world of interrelated things.

Whereas the Taoist thinking advocates an individual way of self-realization, classical Confucianism emphasises a social self aiming at overcoming selfishness, which is considered to be the greatest obstacle on the way towards a society based on principles of solidarity and harmony. In an Ibsenian context one should likewise pay attention to the fact that according to Confucius "there is no essential human nature" (Hall and Ames 1). Humanity is a cultural achievement "articulated as a specific complex of roles and relationships" (Hall and Ames 2) making the Confucian self "irreducibly social" (Hall and Ames 2). Hence there are obvious reasons to believe that an asocial figure like Peer Gynt occurs as a stranger to a Confucian audience. It is significant that Confucius from the point of view of common sense rejected every airy enterprise and "denounced the danger of leaving the firm earth to soar into the unknown hazy regions of fantasy" (Werner 73).

In a lecture given at a conference in Hon Kong last year I suggested people use the term "the contextual self" for Peer Gynt's lived life. In an article about Chinese thinking, David Hall and Roger Ames introduce the term *ars contextualis* (Hall and Ames 1) for the most general understanding of order. Whereas the Western system of order is based on "uniformity and pattern regularity," the Chinese idea of order is connected with the notion of "the artful disposition of things" and "the manner in which particular things present-to-hand are, or may be, most harmoniously correlated" (Hall and Ames 2). In *Peer Gynt* Ibsen depicts the cognate conflict between an order represented by personal and ethical regularity on the one hand and an order characterized through spontaneously organized combinations and re-combinations of concrete scenic settings according to the contextual necessity on the other hand. On the level of his lived and imagined life Peer goes for an aesthetic representation of personal order more in keeping with the Chinese preference for combining the diversity of phenomena in accordance with "the artful disposition of things" expressed in the term *ars contextualis*. From this point of view it seems likely that a Chinese audience would comply with Peer's contextualized changeability rather than with the unifying

demands required by a single-ordered world-understanding governed by universal principles. There are obvious reasons for productions of *Peer Gynt* in China to pay attention to the Chinese way of thinking, giving priority to “the belief that the things of nature (including the human existence itself) may be ordered in any number of ways”, and in connections with works of art this is “the basis of philosophical thinking as *ars contextualis*” (Hall and Ames 3).

The previous considerations have shown that images and symbols created under the influence of Western cultural traditions are not directly transferable to cultures alien to the original sources of creativity. When the symbolic and philosophical framework of *Peer Gynt* moves to China, it may prove necessary to adapt it to comparable expressions and images in the target culture. Likewise the dialectic of self-realisation in Ibsen’s play may be subject to re-evaluations according to the theories and practices of self-understanding in the traditions of Eastern thinking. That doesn’t of course mean that you need the context of a foreign culture to open our eyes to the changing relations for the changing relations between the play’s boundary-building components. In *Peer Gynt* Ibsen constitutes a global network of interrelated themes, motifs, and genres that link and relink various single elements in order to highlight the multiplicity of combinations the play allows.

【 Notes 】

1. “og det, at overskride Grænserne, har stedse gjort mig lidt forsagt.” (Ibsen, CE, vol. VI/1, p. 136). Referring to the aesthetic intentions of artistic writing Ibsen asserted that “i vor tid har enhver digtning den opgave at flytte grænsepæle” [“in our time literature should aim at moving borderlines”] (Ibsen, CE, vol. XV, p. 371).
2. The same motif in a slightly varied form one finds in a fairy-tale called “First discuss the Price when the Pig is Dead” in Wolfram Eberhard, *Chinese Fairy Tales and Folk Tales* (London, 1937), p. 164ff.
3. David Hall, Roger T. Ames, “Chinese Philosophy,” *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. E. Craig (London, 2009) 1f.
4. Cf. Brook Ziporyn, *The Penumbra Unbound. The Neo-Taoist Philosophy of Guo Xiang* (New York, 2003) 91ff.
5. Quoted after: E. T. C. Werner, ed., *Myths and Legends of China* (London, 1922) 73.

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