

The Situational Variation and Aesthetic Features of Chinese Traditional Drama^{*}

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As a specific name, Chinese traditional drama appeared in the 1960s, which specifically refers to the reserved plays of various traditional dramas that coexisted with modern dramas and newly edited historical dramas before the foundation of New China. Traditional drama has aesthetic characteristics such as freehand, stylization, singing and dancing, and it has profoundly affected the aesthetic taste of the Chinese people because of its rich spiritual and aesthetic accumulation.

Keywords: traditional drama, aesthetic, characteristic, stylization

“Traditional drama”, as far as language habits of the masses is concerned, can be understood broadly or narrowly. Broadly speaking, the tradition of five thousand years, and modern century reform, as well as the span of 17 years from 1949 to “Cultural Revolution” should be included (He, 2014), but this does not mean that traditional drama has long appeared as a specific name. On the contrary, there is a relatively short history about the highlighted identity and clear definition of the traditional drama.

Variation in the Situation of Traditional Dramas

Since the end of the 19th century, our understanding of traditional drama has experienced a complicated evolution process from criticism, reevaluation to rational cognition. The identification and clarification of the identity of the traditional drama was completed under the strong impact of Western culture. During this period, the traditional drama was a specific derogatory term, which was regarded as a remaining thing that needs to be discarded. At the beginning of the 20th century, when responding to the impact of Western culture, a group of scholars represented by Liang Qichao, Cai Yuanpei, etc. put forward the idea of “new man”, emphasizing that enlightenment should start with the transformation of national character and make ordinary people learn to be modern one. During this period, Liang Qichao took the lead in raising the banner of improving traditional operas, advocating the inclusion of new era content through old opera styles, and including warning words through small skills (Liang, 1989, p. 2). He tried to make the drama realize the politicization function of propagating new ideas and reshaping new nationals. Liang Qichao did not oppose the old form of traditional drama, but Chen Duxiu, Hu Shi, Lu Xun, and the others believed that traditional drama should be vigorously criticized or even completely denied. For example, Chen Duxiu has firmly questioned the existence value of

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traditional opera: “Does our drama have any value in literature, art and science?” (Chen, 1993, p. 380). Hu Shi considered Chinese drama as the old-fashioned, and the things such as music, makeup, swinging the whip were just remains that should be discarded, as “the emperor is gone, however, when the president came out, the ground was still covered with loess, and the celestial offerings were still worshipped every year” (Hu, 1918). Lu Xun criticized the happy ending of traditional Chinese drama from the perspective of national character, deeming that it is a manifestation of the inferior root of the Chinese people who dare not face up to the miserable life, finding no solution while always being afraid of trouble. Liu Bannong held the view that the drama is nothing more than one solo, two duets, two fights, and many random fights (Liu, 1917). There are no other things than these 16 Chinese words. Although the intellectuals in the New Culture Movement regarded traditional opera as an untimely conservative thing, which had the significance of the times and the impact of breakthrough, it could not conceal its extreme view of lack of dialectical thinking. During this period, although there were different voices defending traditional drama, the strength was limited, and much to our regret, this debate went beyond academic domain, and even evolved into personal attacks and political struggles.

The Traditional Drama in “All-Three-Advocated”

Traditional drama was explicitly raised in the 1960s as a key word in the category of aesthetics and drama, and a symbolic reference with unique connotation. In 1960, from April 13 till June 17, the Ministry of Culture held a two-month “Observation Performance on Modern Theme Drama” in Beijing, during which Vice Minister Qi Yanming published an article in the Beijing Daily to emphasize: It is necessary to promote modern, traditional, and newly compiled historical dramas (Qi, 1960). As a drama repertoire policy, “all-three-advocated” was formally proposed for the first time; a week later, the *People’s Daily* published an editorial article that further elaborated the all-three-advocated policy:

In promoting at the same time as modern repertoire, we must not neglect to continue to organize traditional repertoire We should vigorously promote free competition in art, and implement the policy of “living flowers in full bloom” ... all-three-advocated ... The diverse appreciation needs of the masses should be fulfilled. (Editorial, 1960)

The so-called all-three-advocated mentioned in the article refers to the three kinds of dramas: modern drama, traditional drama, and newly-edited historical drama, which are also called “three sets of carriages”. In the report, “traditional drama” was grandly launched as a repertoire of modern dramas and newly-edited historical dramas.

Actually, the acquisition of the “name” of traditional dramas was not smooth. As early as the end of 1948 before the foundation of New China, the *People’s Daily* has delivered an editorial article entitled “Planning and Reforming Old Dramas”, which refers to the traditional drama with “old drama”. Behind the term of old drama is the high expectations of needs to be reformed. In order to make the drama repertoire to meet the needs of the construction of New China to the greatest extent, the principle of “walking by two legs” (Liu, 1994, p. 1458) between modern repertoire and traditional one came into being. Till now, the traditional drama was re-accepted after experiencing the coldness at the beginning of the foundation of New China. However, since the principle of “walking by two legs” was put forward in the symposium on the theme of traditional opera about modern life, people’s cognition of “two legs” still shows the eccentricity of being aware of the heart. It was not until the introspection of Zhou Enlai in the dramatic world in which he clearly stated “walking by two legs” that “the leg of traditional drama” was truly valued. Through this kind of breakthrough efforts, the principle of

“all-three-advocated” emerged, which is actually an expression of forced intervention (Fu, 2016, p. 222). Traditional drama is concurrent with modern drama and newly edited historical drama by this principle.

Generally speaking, compared with modern dramas, traditional dramas are mainly represented by the historical characteristics of the subject and the stylistic features of expression techniques. By contrast with the newly edited historical dramas, the traditional dramas are more artistically different. The drama is more inclined to the pursuit of artistic truth, then the newly edited historical drama pays more attention to the unity of the truth of historical life and of art, in that the educational function of drama is emphasized. It can be seen that traditional dramas especially refer to the reserved items of various traditional dramas left by 1949.

The Loss and Rediscovery of Traditional Drama

After the reform and opening up, the traditional drama gained a relaxed atmosphere of survival and ushered in a climax of its performance. However, the good times did not last long. In the late 1980s, on one hand, the performance opportunities of traditional dramas are reduced due to the appropriate control of the Ministry of Culture; On the other hand, the citizens, especially young people, have shown unprecedented indifference to traditional arts, and are strongly impacted by Western literature and art. The culture shows irrational fanaticism, and the traditional drama becomes “elegant art” which is ignored just crying lonely in the corner.

It was not until the mid-to-late 1990s that as the country paid more attention to traditional culture, including traditional Chinese art, interest in traditional drama revived under the conscious guidance of it. In May 2001, Kunqu was included in the list of the first batch of “Masterpieces of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity” announced by UNESCO in Paris, as the Chinese first traditional art to win this honor. Since then, with tendency of non-material cultural heritage and the active appeal of the country, the traditional drama has re-entered the life of the Chinese people and revived in the city’s theater and the celebration of farm festivals. The proper status and value of traditional dramas are finally re-understood by people in dialectical thinking after being criticized, denied, and forcibly transformed. Since the 21st century, the state has introduced a series of policies on inheriting traditional dramas, and the ecosystem of traditional dramas has improved significantly. In the joint efforts of the actively guided government, the theorists who strongly appealed, the active performers of the opera, and the masses who have changed their understanding of traditional culture, traditional drama has received courtesies that have never been seen in nearly a century.

Aesthetic Characteristics of Traditional Drama

As a reserved repertoire before the foundation of New China, traditional drama has extremely unique aesthetic characteristics, mainly expressed as freehand quality, singing and dancing character, and prototypical quality.

Freehand

Freehand quality, as opposed to realism, originates in Chinese painting and extends to the other art categories. The freehand aesthetic characteristics of traditional dramas are closely related to Chinese traditional poetic theories, and are inextricably linked to debate between language and meaning of Chinese philosophers; it also has an inevitable causal relationship with the time and space limitations of drama performance. Freehand quality emphasizes the profound meaning contained in the artistic image, and requires the artist to focus on the spirit and attach importance to the conscious transmission of the will of subject.

Freehand traditional dramas quite differ from Western dramas and modern dramas in their creative concepts. What they pursue is not the imitation of “action” referred to by Aristotle, nor the exact copy of the objects in life, while they emphasize the implicit and exaggerated expression on the basis of highly condensed object characteristics by following the intrinsic logic of life not the real one, the minimalist symbols expressing profound meaning to make them enjoy the pleasure of aesthetic imagination not being laid out only for sensual indulgence in their aesthetic effect.

Freehand traditional opera aesthetics are reflected in all aspects of opera activities, and are often achieved by virtualization: The simple table and two chairs on the stage design, the space treatment of “walking all over the world in three and five years”, the facial makeup of the opera actors, the dresses based on the identity, status, and age of the characters, ignoring the seasons and regions, and the simple characters props; exaggerated expressions and actions, etc., are all integrated in the performances of actors in the drama stage, and they focus on life in a deformed manner.

The Character of Singing and Dancing

Singing and dancing is another important aesthetic feature of traditional drama. In ancient China, the trinity of poetry, music, and dance collectively conveyed the tradition of the ancestors’ emotional expression of cosmic life. Although this tradition changed with the “consciousness of literature” in Wei and Jin Dynasties, various styles were independent in succession. The roots of its folk art have not broken, and by the Song and Yuan Dynasties, drama, a comprehensive art with various performance elements like singing, dancing, rap, and action, finally matured. In the course of its own development, singing and dancing are gradually condensed into the aesthetic characteristics of opera art. Qi Rushan summarizes the “beauty” of traditional Chinese drama as “no voice is not singing, no movement is not dancing”(Qi, 2005, p. 198).

Drunken Concubine, a traditional Beijing drama, is not the first performance by Mei Lanfang, but is famous for him, mainly for the reason of the charm of singing and dancing. The Concubine Yang performed by Mei Lanfang is not different from other concubines in language and in dress, while the difference lies in song and dance. In singing and dancing performances of Mei Lanfang, firstly, the frustrated Concubine Yang pretended to be calm, her pace being stable; then her worries faded away by drinking, her pace also gradually becoming disordered, and her eyes increasingly blurred. In the end, she was drunk and had to return to the palace with a chaotic pace. In the performance, Mei Lanfang pushed her sorrows in the middle of drunkenness by singing and dancing so as to put the image of a lovely beauty to the audience.

Stylization

Drama is a kind of performing arts, and its aesthetic realization ultimately requires the benign interaction between the actors on the stage and the audience off the stage. The audience is an important subject to realize its aesthetic value in the drama activity, who cannot like the life itself directly be on the stage. If the drama is exactly the same as life, it will lose the value of existence. Therefore, in the specific performance of traditional drama, the aesthetic characteristics of traditional drama are prominently reflected in the stylization that attracts the audience with the beauty of form.

Stylization is a vivid reflection of the way of thinking of the Chinese ancestors in observing the objects in the drama activities. Through the long-term observation and reflection of opera artists, it characterizes objects, situations, body shapes, movements, postures, expressions, etc. in real life, and shows them on the stage in a

form that the public is familiar with but also being strange. The formation of stylization has both the function of imaginative and abstract thinking.

The stylization of traditional drama, which is mostly intuitive and impactful, is shown in all aspects of drama script and drama performance. Singing, reading, doing, and hitting in traditional drama performances; the hands, eyes, body, methods, and steps all come from life, but they are different from the specific things and actions in life. For example, riding a horse is actually a very difficult thing in life, therefore, in the actual riding process, some tools and skillful movements must be needed, such as reins, whips, etc., as well as movements like sending spans, pulling the reins, shaking with a whip, etc. However, on the stage of traditional opera, the props for riding are only the whips. Horseback riding on the stage is accomplished through a series of stylized dancing movements; usually one holds a rein with the left hand and swings a whip with the right hand, moving his body to left or right, etc., showing various moods of rider.

Conclusions

The aesthetic characteristics of each art are highlighted in the comparison. Compared with modern dramas and the other similar arts, traditional dramas are formed by the deep Chinese aesthetic culture, and their aesthetic realization is subject to objective conditions such as time and space. As a result, freehand quality is formed. Traditional drama is also an art that integrates many skills; singing and dancing is a historical choice to realize its freehand quality. It is also the singing and dancing nature, which not only connects the traditional trinity of Chinese poetry, music, and dance, but also gives it a different appearance from Western drama and opera. Stylization is another aesthetic feature of traditional drama, which is reflected in many links from script to performance. Of course, while adhering to the authentic aesthetic characteristics of traditional scripts, we should also actively think about innovation and development, so that this artistic treasure can continue to show its charm in the inheritance.

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