

Analysis of Mask Art in Japanese Noh

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Abstract—"Noh" is a drama that the performer should wear on mask. It is originated from Japan and is the only extremely aesthetically valuable masquerade drama surviving in the world. The special mask used in the performance of Noh is called the Noh mask. Noh mask can be called the key to Noh and is also the most important and valuable object for the performers of previous Noh dramas. This paper aims to analyze the artistic aspects of Noh mask and extract the artistic elements in it that can be applied to modern art. At the research level, both Japanese native Noh art researchers and foreign Noh researchers are making researches on the basis of three levels of Noh mask, namely: craft molding level, art aesthetic level, and mask character level. While studying the art of Noh mask, the research should be conducted in combination with multidisciplinary to increase the scientific and in-depth nature of the research. Combining with the artistic elements, artistic emotions and artistic techniques in the Noh mask, it is also a hot topic to study the potential of applying Noh mask in modern product design and graphic design.

Keywords—Noh; Noh mask; art

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Brief View of Noh

The expressions of oriental art are implicit and restrained. Throughout the history, the pursuit of oriental culture has always been to feel the inner deep meaning from the plain outside. Just as far as Japanese art is concerned, the pursuit of exquisite connotation in boring is the spirit of Japanese aesthetics. Among them, the three-spiritual level of artistic beautify in the "silence" taking "elegant" as the core connotation, the "sentimentality" taking "sorrow" as the core content, and the "emptiness" taking "serenity" as the center is the three major supports of Japanese traditional artistic aesthetic structure and plays a dominant role in the mainstream aesthetic consciousness of Japan. Among the three aesthetic forms, "serenity" is most recognized and well-known in Japanese traditional beauty; and the "Noh" in the three traditional Japanese dramas is recognized by the researchers as a drama that can show "serenity" the most.

In Japanese, "Noh" refers to having special talents or skills. Therefore, Noh can be translated as "an artistic drama with special skills". In terms of the content and form, it is a stage performance art that combines poetry, sound, song and dance, and folk art. In terms of history, it is one of the most representative traditional dramas in Japan and the oldest drama surviving in the world. In plot, Noh drama shows a world view that is close to and beyond the real world. The

protagonists in the drama are often avatars such as heroes or demons; and the story is advanced and completed by the protagonist in form of telling story; and accompanying with background music and narration, a complete and elegant music drama is formed.

B. The Category of Masks in Noh

As the American dramatist Eugene O'Neill pointed out in studying the world drama, wearing a mask can greatly enhance the artistry of the theatrical performance and at the same time provoke the viewer's imagination. He said, "The mask itself is dramatic... The mask itself is more subtle than any facial expression that the performer can reveal, and is more ornamental, more unpredictable, and more artistic. If anyone doubts this statement, try to confirm it from the Noh masks in Japanese drama, the masks in Chinese Nuo opera, the types of facial makeup in Peking operas, and the original tribal masks of Africa."

The most famous feature of Noh is that the protagonist must wear a mask to perform. The mask is a special and key prop in the drama. It is the essence of the performance of Noh. This type of mask has a professional name called "Noh mask".

When it comes to the category of Noh masks, the academic circle usually has two ways of categorization. First, according to the image of the mask characters, it can be divided into five categories: old man, man, woman, ghost and demon. There are also variations in the five categories; even the masks used to represent the same character are usually different in image and level. Secondly, according to good and evil, it can be divided into two types: the fierce-look mask and the good-look mask. The fierce-look mask portrays a fierce and brutal artistic image, often with horns on head, green face, buckteeth, protruded eyeball, and fierce face look, indicating "to kill evil by evil", such as Hannya as shown in "Fig. 1". On the contrary, the good-look mask is usually approachable, kind, affectionate and amiable in image, and the face is full and shiny. For example, Koomote as shown in "Fig. 2" is a good-look mask.



Fig. 1. Hannya.



Fig. 2. Koomote.

C. Analyzing the Importance of Noh Mask in Distinguishing It from Kabuki

Both being treated as famous Japanese dramas, Noh and Kabuki have great difference in terms of the artistic image and performance technique. Kabuki (See "Fig. 3") was originated from the Edo Times in Japan, and already has a history of three or four hundred years. The face of actors performing Kabuki is usually made up. Most of the time, the whiter the face of a male character is, the higher the status of this role will be. Compared with Kabuki, Noh actors usually do not make up, and they can vividly depict the emotions and sorrows of his role on the Noh mask. For performers, Noh mask is of special spiritual value. Noh mask is regarded as a superior heritage by the artists of Noh. From the surface, Noh mask directly gives people an "expressionless" visual feeling, but the change in the angle of the mask can show the fluctuation of emotion. For example, if the Noh mask looks up, that means that the character is happy; and if the Noh mask looks down, that means that the character feels sad and lonely. In addition, if the appropriate lighting and color effect is provided at the same time, the mask can be changed in multiple angles, and different emotions can be reflected by the change of light and shade. In this way, the face that seems to have nothing expressions contains joy, sad, beauty and ugliness; the superficial expression is neglected. However, the emotions that the actors want to convey are added to the senses of the audiences in a forced and subtle way, and further the Noh performance is abstracted. Noh actor can express the emotions to be conveyed through body language and narration. Through the combination between

the virtual and the real, the audience can generate different emotions and further feel the beauty of serenity and elegance in Japanese traditional aesthetics.



Fig. 3. Kabuki.

D. Analyzing the Researches on the Relation Between Noh and Chinese Culture

Noh was evolved from the development of Sarugaku. The early Japanese Sarugaku was deeply influenced by Chinese Sanqu (a type of verse popular in the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties, with tonal patterns modeled on tunes drawn from folk music) drama; and Sanqu was originated from Nuo opera in China. It is not difficult to see that Japan's Noh has a deep origin from Chinese traditional culture.

There are many famous figures in Japanese history originating from ancient China. It is said that the famous Japanese royal mask of Warrior Lanling was sourced from the Chinese traditional opera "Warrior Lanling". During the Northern and Southern Dynasties, the Northern Qi State Warrior Lanling, Gao Changgong, was like a girl. He suspected that he was not powerful enough to overwhelm the public and enemies, so he often wore a ghost mask when fighting. As recorded in "A Record of Teaching Workshop"¹, "The man in mask was from North Qi State. Warrior Lanling, Gao Changgong, was brave in nature but having a girl-like appearance. He suspected that he was not powerful enough to overwhelm the public and enemies, so he often wore a ghost mask graved from wood when fighting." In the fourth year of Zhenguan Period of Tang Dynasty, the Japanese Emperor Jomei dispatched an emissary to China. Taking this chance, the Japanese music master introduced and studied large amount of dances and music from Tang Dynasty. The music and dance "Warrior Lanling" was introduced to Japan and enjoyed a great popularization at that time. It was right on the 40th birthday banquet of empress dowager, when the eight-year-old prince Zhenshu personally performed the opera "Warrior Lanling". Hence, the popularity of "Warrior Lanling" in Japan can be seen (See "Fig. 4").

¹ Ren Bantang. A Record of Teaching Workshop [M]. Beijing: Chung Hwa Book Co., 2012, P6. (in Chinese)



Fig. 4. Mask of Warrior Lanling.

Although it can be said that the Japanese mask art is deeply influenced by China, the later Noh mask has gradually moved towards an independent development path. No matter in craftsmanship, styling, aesthetics and artistic image, Noh mask shows the artistic characteristics of its own nation.

II. SEVERAL ASPECTS OF NOH MASK RESEARCH

A. Research on the Craftsmanship, Styling and Other Aspects of Noh Mask

In terms of craftsmanship, Noh mask is the fusion of carving and painting, namely the combination of knife and stroke skills. The precious mask inherited in the long-lasting Noh is like a great nature both in the strength and softness of the technique, as well as the knife and the painting skills. In material, most Noh masks are made of cypress which is convenient for engraving and polishing.

At the level of styling, Japanese masks are often expressed in a weird and intense exaggerated abstraction method. The artistic technique has many similarities with Chinese traditional masks, showing the concept of oriental art and oriental philosophy in aspects of color, light, sculpture and shape. The surface of the mask has ups and downs of protrusions and depressions. At the same time, in order to emphasize the contrast relationship, the techniques usually use the hollowing method to strengthen the contrast between light and dark, and then apply the color material to whitewash, so that it generally looks golden and unpredictable. Matching with the light and shadow colors on the stage of the performance, the "serenity" beauty of Noh can be vividly shown in front of the audience.

B. Art Aesthetic Research

From the aesthetic level, the artistic beauty pursued by Noh mask is a kind of elegant and quiet serenity beauty originated from nature. This beauty is aristocratic and soul-like, and it is elegant, simple and concentrated. Hence, Noh is called the "art of serenity", which complies with the elegant and simple life value of "Chrysanthemum and Knife" in the essence of Japanese.

Noh actor can shade the feelings with masks, and at the same time use some symbolic stage art such as hints and shackles to express two completely different moods of sadness and smile in the form of "no expression". Some Noh mask looks like smiling, but the eyes are full of sorrow; some seem to be sad, but there is a calm smile on the lips. The aesthetics of Noh mask art always contain a peace and metaphorical color. The viewers of Noh can feel the hidden meaning after the mask. This kind of openness leads to infinite imagination; and the blank of the surface actually implies the infinite metaphorical beauty.

C. Mask Character Image Research

The drama of Noh mainly tells about the great story and tragic deeds of heroic heroes, and shows the legends of the mythical demon and gods in the form of drama. The Hannya becoming ghost due to jealousy, the girl trapped by love, the Qingji becoming snake god due to being cursed, and the warrior who died for the country in war, are protagonists of Noh.

Noh mask is researched by taking the well-known Dangiyou mask as an example. According to legend, the Dangiyou (See "Fig. 5") was transformed from the specter of Emperor Zongde who died resentfully. In appearance, he has a high and sharp red nose, holds a stalk of cattail leaf fan, tall and with two wings. It is well known that there are many stories about ghosts and gods in Japan. The belief of Ghost and gods also has a profound influence on the popular beliefs such as Taoism and Buddhism in Japan. Therefore, the Japanese demon culture has been derived. The characters' image shown on the Noh masks and the materials of scripts of Noh drama are affected by Japanese traditional religions, thus forming a variety of human and ghost mask images.



Fig. 5. Dangiyou.

III. RESEARCH ON THE APPLICATION OF NOH MASK IN MODERN ART

A. Subjects Involved in Noh Mask Research

The study of Japanese Noh involves disciplines such as philosophy, ethics, history, Buddhism, aesthetics, cultural ethnology and drama, and has a wide range of research. The study of drama and culture has always been a topic of concern to scholars in various countries, and thus has formed a number of research climaxes. However, research on this aspect has so far been a deeper exploration of the research on Japanese Noh drama in the academic circle, and has achieved outstanding results.

Taking the national nature of culture as an example, the flowers of art of different nations have different colors and fragrances. Ancient Egypt believed that the life and death of human beings were mastered by God, and thus worshipped the Osiris gods who were in charge of the "hell", thus producing the ancient Egyptian arts represented by huge temples and pyramids. Similarly, the generation of Noh is directly influenced by Japanese traditional national culture. The legends of ghosts and gods and Buddhist art have jointly contributed to the cultural connotation of Noh mask. The Dattigou and Hannya mentioned above are classic images of Japanese traditional culture. The study of Noh mask should also seek theoretical basis in the fields of history, religion, philosophy, etc., so that the research results are more convincing.

B. The Application of Noh Mask in Product Design

The spirit of "serenity" of Noh mask has become its main artistic value, and this artistic value can be flexibly applied to product design.

As is well known, automotive design is very popular in all projects in the current design field, and the head design is the top priority in automotive design. The reorganization of Noh mask elements can provide inspiration for the head design of a car. The focus of reorganization of Noh mask elements is reorganization. The definition of the reorganization is to reorganize the existing artistic images into a new design concept according to the media, rules and proportions and by extraction and processing of the designer in subjective thinking. In the modern design concept, the reorganization of construction methods and design methods have become a new fusion, and the new visual experience it displays is highly valued by the design circle. The head design of BMW JOY (See "Fig. 6") model is reconstructed from the shape of Chinese Peking Opera's mask in a vivid way so that the car becomes attractive to the Chinese auto market and has strong popularity in its visual appeal. In the same way, combining the design elements of Noh mask such as the unevenness and elegance into the shape of the car head is a good starting point for the design.



BMW之悦。英雄所见悦同。

Fig. 6. BMW JOY.

Noh mask also has great value in terms of toy collections. The collection value of the collection of toys is mainly reflected in his artistic value. It is a key change that simply transforms the toy goods into a toy with collection value. If the toy itself has a high artistic aesthetic value, then this toy can be not just a simple toy, but an art with collection value. In this respect, the mysterious and aesthetically pleasing shape of the Noh mask can be combined with the exquisite and professional craftsmanship. If the modern product design method is used for the technological innovation and promotion, the prospect of Noh mask product design in the field of toy collectibles is still worth of looking forward to.

C. The Application of Noh Mask in Graphic Design

All designs are inseparable from the design language. The design language of Noh mask is the artistic language that is recreated by adding new design concepts through the influence of mask craft, styling, aesthetics and character type under the current huge international market. Japanese masks use many artistic techniques to express the mysterious, bizarre, exaggerated, distorted and grotesque design language. Contemporary advertising design, print media, poster propaganda, and visual art can make good use of the essence of the Noh mask.

There are gradual-change elements in Noh mask. The colors used at different positions of the mask are related to each other by a certain medium; and the internal layout relationship between the materials and the texture jointly form a gradual change in the art of Noh mask. There are changes in the compositional image in the process of facial features, decoration, and pattern transformation on the Noh mask. It can be said that it is a very mysterious transition. Many seemingly contradictory images can often achieve a balance of visual perception through the support points of the features. The rational elements of the positional layout make the seemingly-abstract and gradual-change mask reveal an overall harmony. The gradual-change and rational layout in Noh mask design can be well used in the field of graphic design. Mysterious patterns, gradient colors, light and shadow coordination, rational layout, and creative image thinking are all good graphic design points. At the same time, Noh mask has a good visual appeal in image. Rationally adding Noh mask patterns in graphic design can not only enhance the mysterious color of the picture, but also make it

attached to the national characteristics of the art, so that it is easy to attract the viewer's eyes. However, when adding this element of Noh mask, it is necessary to incorporate more rational thinking, maintain not breaking away from the original intention of the graphic composition, and ensure the rational nature of the composition.

IV. CONCLUSION

Noh drama has a long history and is of great significance in Japanese art history. As a traditional Japanese culture and art, the mask art in Noh drama has its own unique attraction and has been used in Japanese local film and television and design works. It is one of the best design points in the future to combine the mask elements in Noh drama art with contemporary design and add added value to products through traditional art.

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