

A Comparative Study of the Artistic Features of Chinese and Japanese Classical Dramas—— Taking Kunqu *The Palace of Eternal Life* and Noh *Yang Guifei* as examples

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Keywords: Kunqu, Noh, Yang Guifei, classical drama; artistic features, comparative study.

Abstract. Kunqu and Noh belong to oriental classical drama and possess the performance and characteristic feature, called “drama poem” and lyricism is their essential feature. As typical representative of classical drama in their country, Kunqu and Noh have different artistic characteristic involved in the arts intimately. So a comparative study on the similarities and differences between artistic features requires a necessary and meaningful research work. This paper tried to analyze the similarities and differences in terms of artistic feature by comparative literature theory and textual analysis method, and took the Kunqu “*The Palace of Eternal Life*” and Noh “*Yang Guifei*” as the center of the comparative research.

1. Introduction

With a long-standing cultural relationship between China and Japan, the two countries’ classical drama forms do exist independently with various features. Selected into the “United Nations Intangible Cultural Heritage” list, Kunqu and Noh are representative ancient artistic forms in the classical dramas of the two countries. Although featured respectively by vividness and silence, Kunqu and Noh have some common artistic charm under cultural blending, while the classical drama forms evolve independently in parallel with the similar cultural background of oriental dramas.

Kunqu inherited opera and music in Han&Tang Dynasty, which represents a third-generation outgrowth of an era when ancient artistic performance are combined together. Meanwhile, with the long-distance spread to Japan within Han&Tang Dynasty, Chinese classical drama-music and dance, music, Jiyue (Gigaku) exert a profound effect on Noh through from the beginning, leaving a mirror-like correspondence between the two representative oriental classical dramas. Specifically, Kunqu and Noh are both part of “Drama Poetry”, which means a special emphasis on lyricism and spiritual expression. In addition, they synthesize elements of classical art forms of both countries and obtain a traditional performance formula through seeking formal beauty on the stage.

However, in the aspect of aesthetic interests, expression ways and spiritual purpose, the unique cultural ethos of Japanese nation, such as emotion, psychology and aesthetic value are particularly enhanced with the development of Noh. Noh, actually, is a reflection of many external cultural phenomenon, including blending, assimilation, and transmutation. Take Kunqu “*The Palace of Eternal Life*” and Noh “*Yang Guifei*” for example, being based on the same poetry named “*The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*” though, Kunqu and Noh differ greatly on treating materials, themes and working out the plots with common literary text. Rooted in different cultural soils, Kunqu and Noh, both of them show their extraordinary splendor as two exotic flowers.

The Noh that originated from the Chinese theme is called “Tangshi Noh”, of which *Yang Guifei* is only Noh whose protagonist is Imperial Consort Yang, as well as the only “Katsura mono” of all “Tangshi Noh”. “Katura mono”, denoted to wig Noh in Japanese, usually tells the story of ghostly woman who has unforgettable love. Adapting *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* into a drama, Komparu Zenchiku, the author of *Yang Guifei*, had faithfulness to the poems and original stories in Bai Juyi’s work. However, he merely selected the part of the alchemist going to Penglai Palace after the death of Consort Yang rather than stick to narration for completed plot. With unique styles of

forms, spirits and aesthetic features, Tangshi Noh is the result that indigenous culture of Japan reciprocally mixes together with the external culture from China. A comparative study of makes it possible to grasp the differences in the artistic characteristics of Chinese and Japanese classical dramas. In this article, the author studies *The Palace of Eternal Life* and *Yang Guifei's* historical background, meaning, and subjects by analogy studies of comparative literature, for the purpose of finding out the analogies and difference between classical dramas in China and in Japan. Moreover, the process of finding out the similarities from the contrast of classical dramas which are rooted in different cultural soils can be regarded as an academic exploration and novelty.

2. Structure features and aesthetic form

2.1 Stage performing patterns

Oriental drama art represented by Chinese classical drama art and western drama art represented by European drama are the two major systems in the history of world drama. There is a sharp distinction between their aesthetic characteristics due to the great differences in cultural background. With the traditional literature theory of imitation, western drama takes the first stride on the path to make itself true-to-life, and gradually establishes its realistic concept based on the principle of seeking truth and representation, thus pulling itself away from the eastern drama, whose tilt towards lyricism and freehand expression.

Oriental drama is essentially a kind of art of poetic life, which is characterized by high synthesis of integration, freehand, singing and dancing. Drama directors should change dramatic literature written in words into another artistic form expressed by stage figures, which means developing the inside information of a poem and treating with the information in a procedural process. Kunqu and Noh, the lyrical "Drama poetry", use specific performance pattern, poetic lyrics and original dancing music as a means of expression and refine them to create a lyrical atmosphere with abstract aesthetic pursuit. In the form of song and dance drama, both of Kunqu and Noh value stylized performance, poetic lyrics highly, which epitomize the oriental classical drama with distinct national characteristics and aesthetic experience for the audience.

As an ancient Chinese artistic line goes "No movement that is not dancing; no sound that is not music", Kunqu is a comprehensive and dramatic stage art, a harmonious unity of singing, presenting, acting and dancing. Kunqu shapes characters and reflect conflicts regard the development of the time and space as the clue. Kunqu pays close attention to releasing emotion and "pursuing silence through movement", arranges some relatively "quiet" scenes in the play, and expresses the inner feelings of the characters through delicate singing and action design. In the story structure of "a beaded chain of plots", the inner feelings and potential thoughts of the character are also revealed with time flowing on the stage of Kunqu. In the section of "Dancing in plate" in *The Palace of Eternal Life*, Consort Yang dances in a plate while Li Longji (Ming Emperor in Tang Dynasty) drums and sings, reappearing the well-known "Dance Seduction" before the audience through rich synthesis of dances, figures and vocals. Blending of songs and dance, expression through actors' eyes, embody the true love between the protagonists, and beckon the audience with vividness and beauty.

In comparison with Kunqu, Noh puts a high value of heart-to-heart emotion transmitting and "pursue silence through silence", tending to be concise and reserved, internalizing the characters' emotions and presenting them in silence. Due to the lack of drama conflict, the motivation of the development of the plot mainly rely on the characters' inner voice and monologue; out of the aesthetic of "Serenity", however, the performances of emotions and sorrows must be controlled to a minimum, and for the experience of imaginary beauty in senses and mind, it must raise to the level of the grasp of the abstract illusory world from the observation of objective things. Moreover, on the stage of Noh, most of the characters are ghosts or human souls, so "Noh masks" are widely used and are regarded as the spirit of Noh at last. The performer does not express their feelings as a real and natural person does, but pursues the beauty of "serenity", that is expressionless and muted. The audience can only construct a rich picture of the drama through indirect forms such as music and motion. Different from the performance of externalized emotions in *The Palace of Eternal Life*, in

Yang Guifei, the protagonist sits on the stage for a long time quietly, internalizing full of the emotion, conveying emotion through bowing down and raising the mask slightly and crooning in silence, and eventually, listening to the answer to life and death with inevitable impermanence.

2.2 Plots and conflicts

The Palace of Eternal Life and *Yang Guifei* both belong to dramatic poems, which mean that the plot is not the only part of key element for the Chinese and Japanese classical dramas. Compared to Kunqu, Noh even attaches more importance to discarding the pursuit for complete storylines and extracting abstract emotions among the works. Lyricism is the core of the Noh, focusing on the use of beautiful, elegant words and stories with simple but romantic storyline to create a lingering sentimental atmosphere, while the plot conflicts are behind the scenes. *The Palace of Eternal Life* narrates the tortuous process of Li and Yang's love story, including the extravagant life of the emperor and concubine, after Yang is selected as the imperial consort, the greatest upheaval in their royal life due to "An-Shi Rebellion in Tang Dynasty" and the eternal sorrow after the death of Yang. The storyline of the emperor and his consort and the political background combine and conflict with one another, as a result, there may be a reciprocal causation between them.

The Palace of Eternal Life is composed of love of the living and love of the dead, and the story of Consort Yang's death performed by the "soul" female role accounts for nearly half of the drama. However, according to the historical records and the later retention of the North and South Kunqu, it is extremely rare for the "soul" female role to be on the stage. The current repertoires include "Grumble in pavilion" and "Shock on banquet" all cover the love story when Yang is still alive. Even in the latter part of the drama, there are two classical arias, "Hearing the bell ring" and "Crying before the statue", but both of them revolve from the perspective of Li and reveal the love of the living as well. China's long-term tradition of farming society has molded Chinese people's concept of "periodicity" strongly since ancient times, focusing on "reunion" and "finishing what they start". Therefore, the classical Chinese dramas tend to avoid tragedy; the last part of the Ming and Qing dynasties' legends is almost entirely named after "reunion" and must satisfy the audience's expectation of "happy ending". In consequence, *The Palace of Eternal Life* inherits the spiritual power of "The Heavens and the Earth will meet each other again" in *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, the whole drama ends with the "Moon Palace Reunion" with characteristic of romanticism. The characters in this drama are beyond life and death, they are "still alive even though physically dead", creating a happy ending which adapt to Chinese traditional aesthetic interest in order to remove the tragic color. All above embody of China's cultural psychology that values the temporal world and life as well as detests the death.

Noh artists prefer to extract human emotions as well as embody the abstract culture rather than recreating the life and lifestyle of the temporal world realistically. As a result, *Yang Guifei* uses the title from Chinese subject, though, it is more refined with shorter length and its plot is more straightforward. A lot of the Noh's verses come from *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, highlighting "poetizing" rather than realism. Unlike the interpretation of the love from life to death between the emperor and his consort, *Yang Guifei* only shows the part of "love after death", almost reappearing the second part of *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, covering the plot of the emperor's sending of an alchemist to look for the soul of Yang after her death. The narrative perspective in the play is mainly based on Yang, abandoning the interpretation of the love in temporal life and superfluous conflicts and characters, even the object of love, Emperor Li, do not appear in the play unbelievably. *Yang Guifei* focuses on the fact that Yang is always emotionally attached, and suffers from the insurmountable limits of life and death. Its focus is only on the pure and beautiful love, commemorating the impermanent and fragile love between men and women. As a sharp contrast with the traditional Chinese "union psychology", the aesthetic taste of the Japanese is utterly different. While *The Palace of Eternal Life* emphasizes the removing of the tragedy colors, *Yang Guifei* requires the tragedy to be consistent conversely. When Yang brings the impermanent human love to the "Changshi World", the world in the heaven, she is separated from the realistic life forever because

of the limit of death, and love, has become a pain that can never be solved. As a result, the absolute gap between the living and the dead, the change of impermanent love, is inviolable forever.

2.3 Characters

In Chinese classical drama, from the Song and Jin Dynasties to the Ming and Qing Dynasties, Imperial Consort Yang's image creation has experienced a complex evolution from negative to pluralistic; from being criticized to being forgiven even being praised. Among all the dramas related to Yang, *The Palace of Eternal Life* is considered to be the work with the richest and the most delicate characters. Although Yang has experienced the evolution from people to ghosts, from ghosts to immortals, the infatuation and perseverance to love have always run through the procedure of character's change. Yang pursues the equality of one-on-one love as an ordinary woman, waits and be obsessed for her eternal love as a ghost, can't forget the old alliance and be eager to continue the love with the emperor. In the end, she breaks through all obstacles with the instinct of transcending the Three Realms between heaven and earth and reunites with the emperor in the Moon Palace. Hong Sheng portrays Yang as a beautiful and affectionate woman, who is brave to pursue the equality between men and women with rebellious spirit. Therefore, Yang represents the protagonist with preliminary humanistic thoughts as well as citizen features.

Yang Guifei only shows the part of "love after death" in Li-Yang's love story and regards the ghost of Yang as the protagonist. Compared with the image of *The Palace of Eternal Life*, who is still alive after the suffering in Three Realms between heaven and earth, the image of "Consort Yang's soul" in the Noh has undergone significant changes in spiritual temperament. After the incident of Mawei, Yang is separated from the emperor by death and saddened from day to night, but she still keeps the oath with his husband and never forgets him. However, Yang is an undead to the "other shore" and moves from the natural world to the supernatural world after all, she can only look back on the love in the process of going to the other side. Yang in the Noh is like an elf that died because of love but is unwilling to dissipate with the long-lasting love. She can never forget the solemn pledge of eternal love with lifetime, enduring the pain of double despair in her heart and the unchangeable reality. The image of "Consort Yang's soul" in the Noh shows the resentment of "Day after day of you I think, but you are not in view", as well as its beautiful and gentle posture and the painstaking search for hopeless love. The image is pitiful, respectable and cute, which can evoke the sympathy and pity of the audience and this is precisely the embodiment of the supreme beauty of "serenity" pursued by Noh artists.

For Noh, the core aesthetic categories include Twabi-sabi (Emptiness) and Yugen (Serenity) introduced by Zeami, the master of Noh, which forms the artistic tradition of Japanese classical drama. This tradition generally contains the connotation of fascinating, ethereal beauty and remote artistic conception, and has deep roots with the unique aesthetic concept of the Japanese. The beauty of "Yugen" is not limited to the senses, but to the beauty of the spiritual and intrinsic aspects. This kind of beauty focuses on the mysterious aftertaste, the feeling of disillusion and the sorrow from the mystery, and finally reaches the artistic conception of "Wu(Nothing)" advocated by the Zen Buddhism, to the secluded world beyond consciousness where everything means nothing while nothing means everything.

In Japan's Tangshi Noh works, the characters who originally believe in the Taoist with the thinking of "Persevering" often convert to the Buddhism with the thinking of "Anitya", and *Yang Guifei* embodies such spiritual purposes precisely. After the introduction of Buddhism into Japan in the Nara Era, the impermanence of the cycle of life and death is rooted in the hearts of Japanese people deeply. The protagonists in the Noh works often perform to convey the Buddha's idea that "the world is impermanent and the time is fleeting". *Yang Guifei* is based on the love story with all conflicts superficially though, the deepest conflicts in the drama are the nostalgia for the temporal world and the lament of the impermanence of life, and the resolution of the conflict must rely on the Buddhism.

In the theory of the flowers in mirror and the moon's reflection in water in Buddhism, the world is an illusion and everything in the world involves instant change, mortal mutability and emotional

disillusionment. “Admire the beauty of flowers with the king in the Spring Garden of Mountain Lishan. Irregularity in the world being a rule, but now I lonely living in the Penglai hole. Pathetically I gaze the moonlight shadow alone with tears bedewing my coat, as well as moon moved sentimentally weeping so wet. The past has gone, intensely I yearn for”. The religious emotions in the drama always go with the human nature, but under the “impermanence theory”, people’s life and death are both indeterminate and irreversible. The love between the Emperor Li and Consort Yang is so impressive, but with the fleeting impermanence of the world, this kind of love is just a dreamlike bubble, as well as the root of all sufferings. Yang in the Noh knows that she cannot cross the border between life and death; therefore, the lyrics in the play are filled with desperate emotions. Through the comparison of the past and the present, it is the sense of nirvana in Buddhism, “love is not forever, and death is endless”; making the audience to get their souls cleaned while gaining an aesthetic experience.

The religiousness of Noh combines the feature of offering sacrifice to the Gods with the function of propagandizing religious doctrines. As a dreamy Noh, *Yang Guifei* has a lot in common with the Buddhism drama featured with requiem. Yang recalls the love with nostalgia, but this kind of love is fleeting and transient and leads to nihilism; therefore, the character of Yang is full of impermanence. Furthermore, the tragedy spirits of change and nihilism conveyed from the “impermanence” also reveals the theatrical style of Noh, which keeps the holiness and tragedy quality in religion drama with sacrifice.

3. Psychology of Ethical Culture

The aesthetics of Chinese classical drama is closely related to the traditional philosophy of Confucianism with “benevolence” as the core, reflecting the aesthetic tendency of unifying Goodness and beauty in the context of grand social history. The love story of Li and Yang has been given multiple meanings in China’s specific history and cultural traditions. In pursuit of “pure beauty”, the story also involves a clear political and ethical attitude, requiring objective and realistic description as a historical portrayal, placing the sorrow for the rise and fall of a country. The clues of love story are closely combined with the political and historical background, aiming to sing the praise of love with loyalty and beyond death, while expressing the obscure dissatisfaction of the emperor and consort’s extravagant life. In the arias of “Presenting Fruits”, the messenger smashed the wheat seedlings in order to transport the lychee and even killed innocent people; this plot reflects the hideous disaster to the country and the people brought by Yang’s favor. The Confucian tradition requires the literati to keep the role that their works play in history in mind, to be specific, offering significant reference to later generation. “Presenting Fruits” and “Smashing Thieves” express the deep condemnation of the ruling class’s extravagant desires and ruthlessness, reflecting the mission of the ancient Chinese literati, “writing are meant to convey truth”, further, literature has always been the main way to spread moral thoughts with profound influence of Confucianism.

Compared with the political and ethical characteristic in the aesthetics of Chinese classical drama, Japanese literature is always separated from politics and ethics, and its literacy vision is narrower and more introverted. For the “exotic text” of Li-Yang’s love story, it is not required to combine the story with the extensive social history and political ethics, but to pay attention to the expression of personal emotions, to gain appreciation and aesthetics. *Yang Guifei* only tells about the experience of Yang after her death, evading the historical facts that almost ruining the country and refining the story into a pure and beautiful love story, idealizing and diluting the political and ethical image of Yang. For the character of Consort Yang’s soul, the ethical and moral constraints no longer exist, and the only function of it is to satisfy the emotional needs buried deeply in the audience’s heart and to continue to keep hope for the ideal society. *Yang Guifei* pursues the beauty of art, diluting the practical utility of literature and catering the cultural psychology that Japanese prefers. After Japan’s middle age, Noh gradually became the “style music” of the Japanese samurai class, because it played down the ethical color of the characters, and focused on the beauty of tragedy from the contradiction between personal emotion and impermanence. The sense of impermanence and of “life and death” is exactly corresponding to the tragic world view under the spirit of “Bushido”.

“Death is the greatest confusion of mankind itself”. Death is the ultimate destination of human beings, the motif of philosophy and literature. The different views of life and death between Chinese and Japanese have a profound influence on the aesthetic psychology of the audience. Under the influence of Confucianism’s positive attitude to life, the concept of life and death of the Chinese audience, “valuing the temporal world and life as well as detesting the death”, is embodied in the aesthetic perspective of “viewing life from the perspective of life itself”, obtaining emotional experience from the real value of the character. The story of *The Palace of Eternal Life* is composed of love of the living and the love of the dead, but with the traditional Chinese view of forever separation after death, death is still regarded as the end of the world. Even Yang has returned to fairyland after the “decomposition”, the surreal space Penglai Fairyland still belongs to the extension of the real world, thus, Yang is “still alive even though physically dead”. While combining realism with romanticism, *The Palace of Eternal Life* realizes the dissolution of tragedy of death with the traditional happy ending of “Moon Palace Reunion” and focus on the satisfactory life of the temporal world.

Influenced by both Zen Buddhism and Pure Land Buddhism, “impermanence” and “life and death are all the same” are the concepts of life and death that rooted most deeply in Japanese, blurring the absolute boundary line between life and death, and sublimating life into immortality and eternity rather than regarding death as the end of the world. Therefore, while respecting life, Japanese literature also praises death, considering that “life is death, death is life as well”, for an instance, Kawabata Yasunari believes that “Death is not horrible but lovely, not ugly but beautiful; death is life itself, no need to dodge but to pursue.” Beauty is a state of ideals and nihilities, death and life are the highest among all the nihilities of human destiny. Therefore, death is the most representative symbol of beauty. The character of Yang’s soul represents the unexpected death and the impermanence of life, but even the “soul” returned to the fairyland, Yang still cannot discard the memory of love forever, the love and the death are eternal, and the will to live and the will to die are all the same. “Shinju” is a Japanese vocabulary, it originally refers to the unrelenting love, later its meaning gradually extended to “death for love”, to express sincere love with death. *Yang Guifei* does not cover the tortuous process of Li and Yang’s love story, but only encourages audience to appreciate the endless love after death. Though this drama is filled with the desperation of death, but also regards death as the salvation of love. As the incarnation of love, the image of “Consort Yang’s soul” realizes the so-called spiritual beauty and the sublimation of the soul of Japanese. This image expresses the illusory beauty of “serenity” with strong sense of death to the extreme, and is the concentrated expression of the literary creation tradition of Japanese that beyond the concept of life and death.

4. Conclusion

As the typical representatives of the classical dramas of China and Japan, Kunqu and Noh are born and developed under the gestation of oriental culture. Therefore, there are many similarities between them, they both have expressive and freehand aesthetics features as well as art characteristics of comprehensiveness, and both of them are “dramatic poems”, which highlight the lyricism as the essence. Due to the long-standing cultural relationship between China and Japan, the story of Emperor Li and Consort Yang is a representative cross point between the two countries’ traditional cultures. The story of Consort Yang itself is not different from each other in *The Palace of Eternal Life* and *Yang Guifei*, but what is different is that how to interpret the story and how to narrate the story. The character of Consort Yang, which is created by two different cultural genes, shows two kinds of features. Ultimately, Kunqu emphasizes “pursuing silence through movement”, which is more realistic and humanistic, while Noh pays close attention to “pursuing silence through silence”, which emphasizes the tragic beauty of “serenity”. Kunqu values the temporal world and life as well as detests the death, continues to offer significant reference to later generation; while Noh believes that death is a symbol of supreme beauty far beyond political and ethical limits.

For the classical dramas from the two countries, their differences can be found easily, both of them show the uniqueness rooted in specific cultural conditions and national temperament in the

aspects of stage performance, image shaping, artistic conception and aesthetic form. The characteristics of the “Opera of Consort Yang” of Kunqu and Noh are within the framework of the national spirit and aesthetic orientation of the classical dramas of the countries and nations. In fact, the cultural differences reflected in the repertoire of the dramas will exist in the various dimensions of the cultures of China and Japan more widely.

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