

Cross-cultural Interpretations of Chinese Drama in *The China Review*

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ABSTRACT

The research object of this article is the feature articles on Chinese drama published in *The China Review*. In detail, the article intends to investigate the Westerners' knowledge and understanding of Chinese drama in the late 19th century from two aspects: the introduction of Chinese drama in *The China Review* and its reviews, and to explore the role and significance of *The China Review* in introducing and disseminating Chinese drama to the English-speaking world in the history of cultural exchange between China and the West.

Keywords: *The China Review*, Chinese drama, Cultural exchange between China and the West.

1. INTRODUCTION

As a constituent of culture, art carries the charm of different cultures. Dramatic art, which enjoys long history, is an indispensable part of human civilization. Among the numerous art forms, dramatic art is one of the most distinctive and direct embodiments of a nation's ideology, values and life experience. Drama demonstrates the content and presents the theme through live performance, and the directness of the dramatic image and the strong appeal of dramatic art often resonate with the audience and are loved by people. As Allardyce Nicoll, the British drama theorist, pointed out in *The Theory of Drama* that, of all literary genres, drama was both the most special, and the most fascinating which was the most difficult to capture. Drama was bound up with the dramatic performance, including its crowded audience and universal appeal. Drama was also intimately connected with the underlying consciousness of the people it produced. Drama interacted with people from different times and different ethnical folklores in such a wide range of forms. Embedded with sociality, it was easy to fall into the mixture of coarse fun and the poetic inspiration of the most magnificent, so it was no doubt that it is the most intriguing work in all kinds of literature which came from human ingenuity and people throughout the ages could realize its value, furthermore, people throughout the ages were exploring the secret of drama. This kind of art can accommodated both the

white-faced acrobatic clown and the Danish prince; it can be performed in the most vulgar of village theater stalls and in the most elegant of ancient Athenian theater pantheons [1].

Drama, as an art category with distinct Chinese characteristics, features the charm of Chinese traditional culture. Based on the feature articles on Chinese drama published in *The China Review*, an English periodical in the 19th century, the article explores the following issues: what contents of Chinese drama were of interest to Westerners at the end of the 19th century, how they evaluated Chinese drama, and the role and significance of *The China Review* for the western transmission of Chinese drama and the cultural exchange between China and the West.

2. CHINESE DRAMAS PUBLISHED IN THE CHINA REVIEW

The China Review is a comprehensive sinology periodical in English with great influence at the end of the 19th century, covering various aspects of Chinese culture, literature, history, geography, folklore, society and so on. It was founded by N. B. Dennys in Hong Kong, a British, and the China Mail Office in Hong Kong, Trübner & Co. and Kelly & Walsh Ltd joined their hands in publishing. From its inception in July 1872 to its discontinuation in June 1901, a total of 25 volumes and 150 issues were published. The author group of

The China Review mainly included E. J. Eitel, F. H. Balfour, W. F. Mayers, H. A. Giles, E. H. Parker, J. Chalmer et al. and a large part of contributors were sinologists, diplomats, Hong Kong government staff, journalists and so on. They used *The China Review* as a platform to introduce all aspects of China, and made contributions to the dissemination of Chinese culture to the West and the cultural exchanges between China and the West.

As early as the 1730s, *Chinese Orphan*, a Chinese classical drama, was translated into French and brought to Europe by French missionary J. M. Premare. Shortly afterwards, the French version of the *Chinese Orphan*, namely *Tchao Chi Cou Ell, ou, Le Petit Orphelin De La Maison De Tchao Tragedie Chinoise* by Premare was included in J. B. Du Halde, another French Jesuit, into his book *Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique et physique de l'empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie chinoise*. First published in Paris in 1735, the book stormed the Europe so as to boost the popularity of the *Chinese Orphan*, the Yuan Drama, among westerners.

The China Review published a number of feature articles on Chinese literature, including seven articles devoted to Chinese drama, which are listed as follows:

- A Chinese Farce (A. Lister, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1872)
- The Borrowed Boots (L. M. Fay, Vol. 2, No. 6, 1874)
- Ssu-Lang's Visit to His Mother (G. S. Stent, Vol. 10, No. 5, 1882)
- The Sacrifice for the Soul of Ho Man-Sau, a Chinese play (W. Stanton, Vol. 17, No. 3, 1888)
- The Willow Lute, a Chinese Drama in Five Acts (W. Stanton, Vol. 17, No. 6, 1889)
- The Golden Leaved Chrysanthemum, a Chinese Drama in Five Acts (W. Stanton, Vol. 22, No. 4, 1897)
- The Golden Leaved Chrysanthemum, a Chinese Drama in Five Acts (W. Stanton, Vol. 22, No. 5, 1897)

A *Chinese Farce* was the first article on *The China Review* which covered Chinese drama, the contributor A. Lister watched the play *A-lan's Pig* with H.R.H. Duke of Edinburg at the Tung Hing Theatre and translated the plots into English. The play was a one-act play with the following general outline: Ho A-lan took a few feet of home-spun

cloth to sell at the market and gambled away the money he had got after selling the cloth. Subsequently his wife brought the pig out and asked A-lan to sell it. But A-lan met two scoundrel gamblers in the market and they took him of the pig. A-lan came back home empty-handed and was leashed in the door like a pig by his wife. At dinner, a hunchbacked Buddhist priest came to A-lan's door for alms. A-lan lied to the Buddhist priest that he could cure hunchback, and then leashed the hunchbacked Buddhist priest to the door. He took the Buddhist priest's donation registration list and went to ask for money. A-lan's wife went out after dinner and molested by the hunchbacked Buddhist priest, in the meanwhile, A-lan came back and gave the money to offset the loss of his wife being molested. A-lan and his wife, therefore, had the capital of setting up the tofu shop then the play ended in A-lan couples with laughers.

Ssu-Lang's Visit to His Mother was based on the story of the Generals of Yang Family. In the battle field of the golden beach of the war between Song and Liao, Yang Yen-hui was taken captive by Liao, renamed the Mu-i and even married the princess of Liao. Fifteen years later, Yang Yen-hui heard that his brother Yang Yen-chao was in command, and his mother also escorted army provisions with the camp, then he imperceptibly moved to think of his family. However, due to the tension in war, he cannot cross the border to see them, deep depression was almost killing him. The princess managed to procure Empress's warrants and bade her husband Yang Yen-hui disguise himself as a Tartar, and helped he get through at night. Then Yang Yen-hui was caught as a spy but recognized by his family members so as to enjoy the hard-won family reunion. With tears of joy and sorrow, Yang Yen-hui had to leave in a hurry. The language of the characters in classical Chinese drama is the distinctive characteristics of Chinese drama. Stent's translation deleted a large number of librettos and the spoken parts of the Chinese opera from the original play, and only retained the plot.

The Sacrifice for the Soul of Ho Man-Sau, The Willow Lute, The Golden Leaved Chrysanthemum were translated by W. Stanton from Cantonese opera script. The three plays were all about the hero and heroine who suffered from injustice but finally reclaimed the righteous name. In *The Sacrifice for the Soul of Ho Man-Sau*, Ho Man-Sau took his wife Wong Shuk-Ying to Hangzhou for asylum, Chang Tang framed Ho Man-Sau in an attempt to own his wife. Wong Shuk-Ying destroyed her appearance by herself and sought to hide into a nunnery. After

that, Ho Man-Sau was rescued with a chief gaoler Wong Ling's help. The loved ones reunited and all was well eventually. In *The Willow Lute*, Lee Kee was framed by his step-wife Yang San-chun and her adulterer and put in prison, his son Lee Pao-Tung redress the injustice. *The Golden Leaved Chrysanthemum* was a tragedy. Chü Yüan-kuang murdered Lin Meng-hsien's husband Chang Yen-lin for coveting Lin Meng-hsien. Years later, Chang Yen-lin's son passed the provincial civil service examination when he grew up and retained justice for his father with the help of Sung Tien-pao.

Stanton deems that "foreigners can learn about Chinese history, culture and customs from Chinese drama" [2]. It can be found that the contents of the dramas published in *The China Review* featured the daily life of ordinary Chinese, such as *A-lan's Pig*, *The Sacrifice for the Soul of Ho Man-Sau*, *The Willow Lute*, *The Golden Leaved Chrysanthemum*; Or select dramas themed on popular Chinese folk tales, like *The Borrowed Boots*, *Ssu-Lang's Visit to His Mother*. In addition, these plays were basically English translations of the plays by the contributors after watching the performances in theaters. *A-lan's Pig* was performed at the Tung Hing Theatre in Hong Kong, *The Golden Leaved Chrysanthemum* was acted in the Hong Kong theaters as well, and *The Willow Lute* was "very popular in Hong Kong" [3].

3. COMMENTS ON CHINESE DRAMA IN *THE CHINA REVIEW*

In addition to translating the plays, some of these Chinese drama articles published in *The Chinese Review* also comment on the plays in the introduction before the translated text. From the perspective of L. M. Fay, the Chinese drama *The Borrowed Boots* "though possessing little point to the foreign reader, illustrates the very large class of such performances, which achieve their popularity amongst the Chinese rather from the scope given by the dialogue to the actors than from any intrinsic merit in the plot. It is chiefly as a contribution to our better conception of what passes muster with native critics as a 'screaming farce'" [4].

Chinese opera art is a comprehensive art, with literature, music, dance, fine arts, acrobatics, and martial arts, which demonstrates the wisdom of Chinese literature and art, and a typical representative of Chinese culture. In the opinion of the English-speaking audiences, what they pay attention to is often the content and the plot of the drama, but hardly notice the charm of the language,

the different performance procedures and the specific meaning embodied in the Chinese opera art, let alone the cultural connotations inherent in Chinese thinking.

As to the stage setting of Chinese theatrical performances, W. Stanton pointed out that "what we understand by scenery is altogether unknown on the Chinese stage. Mountains, mountain passes, city walls, temples, graves, thrones, beds, and many other objects are represented by an arrangement of chairs, while the actors depict many scenes by pantomimic motions" [5]. And Stanton considered that "their scenery is inferior to what ours was at the Cockpit and Globe theatres in Shakespeare's time, and about equal to Peter Quince's scenery in his 'Most lamentable comedy and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisby', as shown in the 'Midsummer Night's Dream', where a man with loam over him represents a wall and his spread open fingers a cranny for lovers to whisper through" [5]. Furthermore, different from Western drama, "the orchestra, which through the ear-splitting nature of its music, is the great hindrance to foreigners enjoying a play, occupies the rear-central part of the stage" [6]. Chinese drama actors, moreover, "appear a motley lot as seen there dressing for their parts. They make up very cleverly, especially the men who impersonate females" [6]. And in the military scenes, in addition to the fighting, "the acrobats usually treat the audience to a display of their skill in tumbling and throwing somersaults" [7].

In terms of stage setting, western drama is accustomed to using realistic sets to create stage effects, while Chinese drama chooses as few stage devices as possible, relying mainly on the actors' performances to convey the plot of the play. A. Lister made similar comments to Stanton's on the stage design of Chinese drama performances as well. In the play *A-lan's Pig*, "the pig is represented by a small piece of wood, about the size of a brick, trailed at the end of a string, the scenery is nil, and the furniture of the stage a table and a chair or two, which represent either the inside or outside of a house, a street or a doorpost, as occasion may require" [8]. Lister, in addition, studied about the transcript of *A-Lan's Pig*, the play which he watched: "in the printed play before me, also, there is no list of dramatis personae, no stage directions whatever, no orders as to costumes or properties, no entrances or exits, and no punctuation. The whole reads on in one long sentence from beginning to end, even the names of the persons who speak not being distinguished in any way from the rest" [9].

He argued that "the book of a Chinese play bears much the same relation to the play itself that a very meagre libretto does to an Opera, and the actors 'write up' their parts, and introduce 'local jokes' as occasion may demand" [9].

T. K. Dealy's article *The Chinese Drama*, published in *The China Review*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 1899, is a book review of W. Stanton's book *The Chinese Drama*, published in 1899. The author, Dealy, was an Englishman who worked in the Hong Kong government. Stanton's *The Chinese Drama* includes an introduction to Chinese drama, three plays, *The Willow Lute*, *The Golden Leaved Chrysanthemum*, and *The Sacrifice for the Soul of Ho Man-Sau*, an English translation of a ballad called Peng Tsu, and Muk Lan's Parting, a ballad.

The main points of Dealy's book review are as follows. First and foremost, Dealy proposed that the actual origins of Chinese drama should be traced back to the 8th century B. C. at least. Stanton stated in *The Chinese Drama* that the Chinese drama "only dates back to the reign of the illustrious yet infamous T'ang Emperor, Huan Tsung. [A.D. 713-756], under whom the celebrated 'Pear Garden' music was composed" [10]. According to Dealy's investigation, however, "in the fifth year of Duke Yin of Lu, i.e. 716 B. C., as told in Tso K'iu-meng's Commentary on Confucius' Ch'un Ts'iu, it is recorded that Duke Yin having completed the Shrine-palace to Chung Tsz, his half-brother's mother, was about to instal the Choruses. These Choruses were pantomimic, and waved big feather fans; they also sang and danced during the performance" [10]. Dealy believed that "these mimetic performances which, in the eighth century, B.C., were thoroughly well established in North China" [11]. Therefore, Dealy put forward the origin of Chinese drama was some fifteen hundred years prior to the time named by Stanton.

Subsequently, Dealy commented on the value connotation of Chinese drama. He pointed out that "Chinese plays generally show a leaning to justice and propriety. Some moral principle is generally inculcated. Compared with European plays, Chinese productions are woefully crude and feeble. No native Shakespeare with wood notes wild, has, as yet, appeared; no boisterous Marlowe, no Dekker, no rare Ben Jonson; no modern Pinero entrances present-day audiences with the puzzling problems of life" [11]. Dealy considered that "nothing of exceptional excellence has so far been discovered. Translations are few on account of the poverty of both matter and workmanship. The

authors, judged by their productions, have a fair knowledge of character, but no grace of literary style" [11].

In the third place, Dealy appraised Voltaire's view of Chinese drama is "inaccurate" [11] and "exaggerated" [12]. Voltaire "rashly and incorrectly affirms that the Chinese have cultivated dramatic art for three thousand years", and Chinese people "made living pictures of men's deeds, and that their theatres are schools of morality wherein virtue is taught through movement and dialogue" [11]. In Dealy's opinion, Voltaire classed Chinese drama with the French and Spanish tragedies of the seventeenth century, "Voltaire should know the value of the excellent work done by the dramatists of his own land: at the end of the nineteenth century, his estimate seems absurdly and bafflingly exaggerated still" [12].

Then, Dealy averted his concentration toward the Chinese theater architecture and theater settings. He found that the similarities between present Chinese theater architecture and those of early Rome are pronounced, "the buildings are temporary creations of wood, rapidly run up just before a performance, and as quickly demolished afterwards", and "these wooden theatres were sometimes costly out of all proportion to their duration" [11]. Commenting on the Chinese theatre setting, Dealy pointed out, "scenery in Chinese theatres is of the most rudimentary character: and, Prologue's invitation, in Shakespeare's Henry V., with a little alteration, might well be used at the beginning of any and all Chinese plays" [12].

Conspicuously, against the backdrop of a strong Western theatrical tradition, Dealy did not have a high opinion of Chinese drama as a whole. In his view, the three plays given in Stanton's *The Chinese Drama* were interesting "if only on account of their origin" [11]. Since Chinese drama "freedom from the thralldom of the three unities", it "follows romantic rather than classic models" [11]. At its very best, Chinese drama "may be on a par with the English drama in the middle of the sixteenth century" [11].

However, does Chinese drama with "nothing of exceptional excellence has so far been discovered", as Dealy puts it, and does it "no modern Pinero entrances present-day audiences with the puzzling problems of life"? Chinese classical drama, such as *Snow in Midsummer*, *Autumn in the Han Palace*, *Pei Shaojun And Li Qianjun*, *The Palace of Eternal Life*, *The Peach Blossom Fan*, *Romance of the Western Chamber*, *The Peony Pavilion* and the like,

show the tendency of close combination with reality, with strong practical significance and social utilitarian role. Traditional Chinese drama conflicts are mostly ethical conflicts, while Western drama conflicts are mostly character conflicts, emphasizing the intense ups and downs of emotions, and highlighting the complex and multi-faceted human nature, which are all reflections of the cultural psychology and aesthetic pursuit of various nations. Premare, Du Halde, Voltaire and others were attracted to Chinese drama precisely because they believed that Chinese drama embodied the power of Chinese moral and reflected the Chinese thoughts as well as the spirituality, morality and values of the Chinese people. Though this views and values is somewhat different from the inherent European thoughts and ideas, it is of great significance. As Arthur Henderson Smith pointed out when it came to the social significance of drama, "perhaps the most instructive aspect of Chinese drama is that it can be used as a guide to a theory of life to which most Chinese people are steadfast believers, even if they are not aware of it themselves" [13]. Dealy does not really understand Chinese drama, and his evaluation of Chinese drama is clearly Western culture-centric.

4. CONCLUSION

Compared with Chinese poetry and novel, English periodicals in the 19th century paid less attention to Chinese drama which brought about the fact that the volume of articles about drama was overshadowed by that of poetry and novel. *The China Review* introduced Chinese dramas such as *The Sacrifice for the Soul of Ho Man-Sau*, *The Willow Lute*, *The Golden Leaved Chrysanthemum* to readers in the English-speaking world, which increased the way for them to understand China. However, due to the cultural differences between China and the West, the contributors' understanding of Chinese drama is not in-depth, and one or a few dramas could not represent the overall situation of Chinese drama. A large number of excellent Chinese dramas have not entered the contributors' vision, and some of the contributors' understanding and evaluation of Chinese drama are biased. Nevertheless, the introduction and interpretation of Chinese drama in *The China Review* represents the Westerners' unique interest and interpretation of Chinese drama in 19th century. With the wide-range circulation and dissemination of *The China Review*, these Chinese dramas published in *The China Review* had attracted the attention and facilitated understanding of readers in the English-

speaking world, which, to a certain extent, promoted the early overseas dissemination of Chinese dramas.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is independently completed by Xin Hu.

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