

Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Early Chinese Drama Concepts: A Case Study of Tian Han's Death of a Noted Actor

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Abstract: *In the context of cross-cultural perspectives, drama is considered as an imported commodity for Chinese theater. Tian Han's early works marked a crucial point in the development of Chinese drama. This paper uses textual analysis to examine Tian Han's early drama 'Death of a Noted Actor,' exploring its significant role in laying the foundation for the emergence and development of Chinese contemporary drama from a cross-cultural viewpoint. The analysis focuses on cultural integration, market integration, dramatic aesthetics, and the utility research of how Tian Han's early dramas transcended the temporal constraints and shaped the theatrical concepts that promote the development of contemporary Chinese drama.*

Keywords: Cross-cultural, Cultural integration, Tian Han, Drama

1. Introduction

1920-1929 marked the early period of Tian Han's dramatic works and was also a period of flourishing development for drama in China. Drama, being an imported art form, evolved from civilized plays to student performances, and culminated in what is acclaimed as the birth of Chinese drama—the performance of *Slave's Lament* by the Chunliu Society and other dramatic activities. Drama is popular among overseas students and progressive youths, but it never really caught on in China. The researcher believes that it was Tian Han's leadership in the Southern Drama movement that truly brought drama into the public sphere. *Death of a Noted Actor* is a representative work in this period. To study the history of drama, one must begin with the dramas themselves, examining the scripts. Through this lens, many theatrical concepts are observed in Tian Han's early works, at the same time, these theatrical concepts are absent in contemporary drama in China, and these transcendent theatrical concepts that promote the development of drama.

2. Cultural Integration

Every artistic form has its cultural background. It is widely known that drama is not indigenous to China but rather an imported genre. Therefore, drama naturally encounters cultural conflicts in China and is not easily accepted by the Chinese audience. Initially, drama gained popularity among overseas students and progressive youth mainly because they were exposed to foreign ideas. However, the audience that drama faced consisted mostly of ordinary people who had not been exposed to many of these foreign ideas, leading to drama's lack of appeal among the general population.

Drama originated in Europe, starting from the Renaissance period with the promotion of humanism, the elevation of humanity, and the opposition to divinity. This was followed by the Enlightenment era and the advent of rationalism. After experiencing two technological revolutions, the appeal to humanity reached its peak. The development of drama was closely linked to the social and cultural developments in Europe at that time. By the nineteenth century, the conflict shifted from man versus god to man versus man, with the emergence of realism, focusing on contemporary society and addressing social issues.

China is deeply influenced by traditional culture, particularly Confucianism, which emphasizes the unity of morality and value and the concept of harmony between man and nature. These ideas form the core values of traditional Chinese culture. For instance, in feudal society, the emperor was referred to as the Son of Heaven, showing China's reverence for the Heavenly Way and the lack of liberation of human nature until the complete abolishment of feudalism in 1911.

Thus, the conflict between Chinese and European cultures is obvious. Therefore, for dramas containing Western elements to cultivate a large audience in China, addressing cultural conflicts is paramount, assimilation is not being the ideal solution but integration. In *Death of a Noted Actor*, the concept of cultural integration is exemplified to the fullest extent.

External Cultural Integration

In *Death of a Noted Actor*, the most prominent form of cultural integration is undoubtedly the portrayal of a story set against the backdrop of traditional Chinese opera using the form of drama. On such a basis, the cultural forms of traditional Chinese theatre art are presented everywhere throughout the play, whether in the external form of the performance (flower-face dressing, singing) or in the content (character relationships, cultural background). However, these elements serve as a backdrop while the story itself is enacted through drama.

Firstly, the phenomenon of cultural integration is first seen in the form of performance. Each stage of the story is connected by a small piece of singing. And these chants can be integrated into the story, aptly pointing out the characters in the story also pointing out the development of the story to follow. For instance, when discussing Liu Fengxian's lack of integrity and ingratitude towards Liu Zhensheng, a fitting excerpt from the opera *YuTangChun* is sung by Liu Fengxian: *The prince's family is harmonious, why is there no harmony between me and my husband?* (Tian, H., 2000) Similarly, when Liu Zhensheng is infuriated to death and Liu Fengxian regrets her actions, the lyrics heard are: *Marrying a prostitute, waking up to the dream of the Nanke.* (Tian, H., 2000)

These opera excerpts are closely aligned with the story, ensuring that audiences unfamiliar with drama do not feel confused by entirely new elements.

Internal Cultural Integration

Secondly, cultural integration is seen in its core content—specifically, the relationships between master and apprentice, namely Liu Zhensheng with Liu Fengxian and Liu Zhensheng with Liu Yunxian. Liu Zhensheng and Liu Yunxian, they are the traditional Chinese master-apprentice relationship. Liu Zhensheng used his professional ability to teach Liu Yun's singing skills, and was Liu Yunxian's professional guide. But at the same time, Liu Zhensheng has great control over Liu Yunxian, including control over her life and life, and Liu Yunxian demonstrates respect for her mentor. This aligns with the aesthetic demands of traditional Chinese culture, emphasizing respect and obedience towards superiors. However, it also

reflects the thinness and one-sidedness of Tian Han's characterisation in his portrayal of Liu Yunxian.

In contrast, Liu Zhensheng's relationship with Liu Fengxian, also master and apprentice, portrays a different relationship. Liu Zhensheng does not exercise as much control over Liu Fengxian, who exhibits more complex human traits and even defiance towards authority. This mentor-apprentice relationship is different from traditional Chinese aesthetics, leading to Liu Fengxian's eventual reflection and regret, culminating in tragedy. It is this regret that deeply resonates with the audience.

The comparison between these two sets of mentor-apprentice relationships—one aligning with Chinese culture and the other leaning towards Western culture—ultimately converges back to traditional Chinese culture in the play. The author advocates for traditional Chinese culture in the script, yet does not criticize Western ideologies. Liu Fengxian is not portrayed as an entirely detestable character; instead, Tian Han integrates both ideologies in the play, inducing contemplation among the audience. Traditional culture cannot be erased overnight, nor can foreign ideologies be swiftly embraced. Tian Han recognized this critical issue, and it is the concept of cultural integration in drama that truly allows drama to be accepted.

3. Market Concept

One of the most critical factors for the rapid development and growth of an external art form is its audience base. When there is an audience reception, feedback is provided to the creators, who then continuously improve and feed back to the audience, creating a positive cycle that propels drama move forward. Initially, Chinese commoners were accustomed to traditional opera as an art form. However, at the beginning of the twentieth century, China also faced the impact of Western culture. The Chinese people were at a turning point from the old era to the modern era, with varying shifts in cultural and ideological perspectives, leading to corresponding changes in artistic preferences. To attract audiences, one must first cater to meet the demand. Tian Han's *Death of a Noted Actor* demonstrates a strong market concept, not simply prioritizing one aspect or solely pursuing the new in drama. *Death of a Noted Actor* captures the audience's attention in two aspects: first, by being relatable to everyday life, and second, by intensifying dramatic conflicts.

Relatability to Everyday Life

Traditional Chinese opera often draws from stories of emperors, generals, scholars, and beauties, narratives that are distant from the lives of ordinary audiences and they can not think about it deeply. Shallow emotions here refer to the lack of profound cultural backgrounds and the superficiality of emotions, overly emphasizing external factors without delving into human nature. Tian Han's *Death of a Noted Actor* is inspired by the story of a famous performer in the pear garden. Firstly, such ordinary characters resonate with the majority of the audience, as their joys and sorrows are more relatable, eliciting understanding and empathy. Audiences can see themselves reflected in dramas; stories of emperors, generals, scholars, and beauties are distant from their lives and fail to resonate. However, stories about characters like the performers in the pear garden can connect with their lives, thus evoking deeper emotions. Additionally, audiences can experience profound emotions in *Death of a Noted Actor*, primarily due to its cultural background. Rather than historical narratives, audiences witness stories that could happen in contemporary life. Tian Han sets the backdrop in the present, creating a sense of historical weightiness while gripping the audience's emotions. Furthermore, in *Death of a Noted Actor*, each character has a unique personality that drives the story, rather

than external factors. For example, Liu Zhensheng is undoubtedly kind, as seen in his adoption of Liu Fengxian and Liu Yunxian, stating, *Do you think I took you in to sell you for money? Or to rely on you for my livelihood? None of that. I have no children of my own; I just want to nurture a few talented individuals...* (Tian, H., 2000) However, Liu Zhensheng is also stubborn, persisting in his artistic beliefs and wanting to instill them in his disciples. This leads to conflicts, such as his treated as Liu Fengxian's toys, causing him pain until he tragically witnesses her downfall. Every plot twist and turn in the story is driven by internal factors of the characters. Such tragic characters deeply touch the audience's hearts, as reflected in the saying: *Heaven forgives sinners, but self-inflicted sins are unforgivable.*

Stage Proximity. Apart from sourcing material, what audiences see on stage is similar to scenes from real life, further strengthening the connection between the audience and the stage. For instance, Tian Han sets the stage in the backstage of Chen Dajing's troupe or in Liu Zhensheng's home. In terms of performance, it directly replicates human life states, such as linking arms, removing makeup, or waking up, departing from the stylized performances seen in traditional opera. Furthermore, Tian Han seamlessly integrates life backgrounds, evident in even the smallest details. For instance, when Uncle Yang visits Liu Zhensheng's home to see Liu Fengxian, she brings out a bottle of whiskey, prompting Uncle Yang to say, *Oh, this is my favorite whiskey* (Tian, H., 2000), to which Liu Fengxian responds, *I don't even know what it's called; I only remember the color of the liquor and the bottle's design* (Tian, H., 2000). Such a small prop is used appropriately. Firstly, whiskey did exist in society at that time, ensuring the prop's authenticity. Secondly, the two perspectives on this bottle of whiskey are significant. Uncle Yang prefers Western styles and loves such liquor, while Liu Fengxian, a member of the opera troupe, admires Western styles internally but is limited by her identity, thus only recalling its color and design. This prop usage reflects the authenticity of the characters. The authenticity in small details gradually brings the audience closer to the stage; the closer the connection, the deeper the emotional impact.

Dramatic Conflict

Situations filled with conflict are particularly suitable for dramatic arts, as drama can best represent beauty, perfection, and profundity (Jian, H., 1999). Personally, I believe traditional opera tends to have slightly thinner dramatic conflicts, focusing more on stylized performances and singing, while drama emphasizes dramatic conflicts more. Strengthening dramatic conflicts naturally enhances the dramatic element, making the story more captivating. Dramatic conflicts manifest in internal conflicts within individuals and conflicts between survival environments and individuals.

In *Death of a Noted Actor*, both Liu Zhensheng and Liu Fengxian have different personalities. Liu Zhensheng is kind and stubborn, while Liu Fengxian desires freedom yet deeply loves and respects her master. These contrasting personalities fuel dramatic conflicts and enhance the drama. The conflict between survival environments and individuals is prevalent throughout *Death of a Noted Actor*. Liu Zhensheng's disapproval of mingling in new-old conflicts in society drives the plot. He stubbornly lives in his artistic world but relies on real-life circumstances, he also feels dissatisfied about Liu Fengxian's socializing and Westernized style. On the other hand, Liu Fengxian, on the other hand, lives in a traditional pear orchard environment, but aspires to the freedom that the master dislikes. The extreme conflict between individuals and their environments intensifies the drama.

4. Integration of 'Utility' and Small Theatre Aesthetics

Utility refers to functionality and practicality. From the reform of traditional opera to the introduction of drama in China, its role has been as a tool for social transformation, employing a widely accessible artistic form to achieve the effects of propaganda and social improvement. Coincidentally, the development of drama in the 19th to the 20th century witnessed the peak of realism, for example Ibsen, Shaw, and Chekhov representing the realism that focuses on contemporary society. Realist dramas were also used in China to promote reformist ideologies. The Small Theatre Movement emerged in the late 19th century as an artistic experiment in a free theater, represented by Ibsen's realism, replacing the dominant position of romantic dramas in the West. The Small Theatre Movement pursued a space of free aesthetics and a spirit of freedom, emphasizing the aesthetics of realism and naturalism. Realism and naturalism believe in the deterministic impact of the environment on individuals, shaping characters through detailed descriptions of the environment, internal character expressions, meticulous construction of interpersonal relationships, and advocating for the realistic portrayal of society.

Tian Han is hailed as China's Ibsen, influenced by the Small Theatre Movement, early dramas tended towards artistic aesthetics but contained strong social appeals. The researcher believe the most appropriate choice is not to prioritize utility alongside aesthetics but to conceal the utilitarianism within the aesthetic appreciation of art. This not only achieves social activism but also avoids triggering audience aversion. In *Death of a Noted Actor*, Tian Han hides strong enlightenment consciousness within the artistic aesthetics. During Tian Han's twenty years, he immersed himself in revolution, showing interest in various new ideologies but not blindly accepting or fully assimilating. Tian Han himself epitomized cultural integration, respected in both the traditional opera and drama circles as a leader. He selectively embraced Western culture while integrating it with traditional culture and strongly advocated for enlightenment ideologies. In *Death of a Noted Actor*, it can be seen that Tian Han does not exclude the traditional cultural cohesion of the art form - opera, not anti-feudalism should be a total rejection of the old things. Similarly, Tian Han does not believe in complete Westernization. Just as Liu Fengxian in the play enjoys socializing and admires Uncle Yang's Western lifestyle, she finally realized the traditional values of respecting masters. However, Liu Fengxian is not portrayed as a villain; she is more characterized by her desire for freedom and rebellion against constraints, making her become more lively rather than a one-dimensional persona.

Compared to Tian Han's later dramas, which heavily emphasize utilitarianism, *Death of a Noted Actor* focuses on theatrical aesthetics, conceals the notion of human freedom within the aesthetics of small theaters. What attracts audiences is not aggressive ideological invasion but the beauty of drama, simplifying the dramatic essence of the story. By subtly embedding desired ideologies within the narrative, audiences are gradually guided to contemplate, making it the best approach, as strong impositions often lead to resistance. This is also why *Death of a Noted Actor* is more vibrant than Tian Han's later dramas.

5. Conclusion

Analyzing Tian Han's early dramas like *Death of a Noted Actor* reveals his transcendent theatrical concepts beyond the contemporary era. Firstly, cultural fusion sparks new ideas through cultural collisions. Secondly, the market concept, the object of propaganda ideas is the audience, without the audience there is no way to propaganda. A theatre should know what kind of content the audience likes if it wants to be recognised by the audience. Thirdly,

concealing 'utility' within the aesthetics of drama guides audience thinking instead of forcefully implanting ideas, allowing audiences to learn to think within the realm of drama rather than using drama as a medium for demands. It is these theatrical concepts that have truly allowed drama to flourish in China. Tian Han had made great contributions to the development of Chinese drama.

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