

# The Differences and Reasons of Religious Influences on Chinese and Western Dramas

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## Abstract

The origin of both Chinese and western drama has close relationship with religions. At the beginning of middle ages, however, the Buddhism and Christianity affected the development of Chinese and western drama in China and western countries respectively. This paper analyzes the great influences of Buddhism and Christianity on the process and themes of Chinese and western drama from middle ages, and discusses the reasons of different development process and themes caused by Buddhism and Christianity through the analysis of two different doctrines and the penetrating styles in civil. There are many differences between the Chinese and western dramas, one of which is the description of ghost. In Chinese drama, the ghosts would be involved in the events of the real world, and the in the western drama, one rarely finds the ghost returns to the real world under the influence of the Christianity. The belief in the Buddhism in China is often utilitarian, so the drama under the influence of the Buddhism seldom has the consciousness of transcendence, which is contrary to the western drama.

**Keywords:** drama, Buddhism, Christianity, drama history, drama theme

## 1. Issue Introduction

Compared with western culture, Chinese culture has no integrated religious system and the religion fails to create integrated influence on the society like Christianity in western countries. In drama development history, Chinese religions did not seriously impede the drama development like Christianity did. Since the middle ages, religions have become an extremely important force and the magisterium used to exceed the royalty in European history. The Christianity dominated every field, including education, politics, culture and economy.

The Buddhism that has great effect on Chinese history derived from foreign countries. With the introduction of Buddhism, Chinese have produced the religious consciousness gradually. The spread of Buddhism contributed to the ritualization and religionization of Taoist School and the formation of Taoism. In the Taoism spread process, many scholars and officers are involved in to create an increasing effect on China. This phenomenon may be caused by the positive penetration of Buddhism into Chinese scholar stratum or the advocating of Buddhism by dominators. Although the magisterium did not exceed the royalty in China, the Buddhism had profound influence on Chinese culture.

Drama as a mass entertainment artistic form has received more cultural edification. The religion affects the dramatic origin, development and themes. What different influences do Buddhism and Christianity have on drama in China and western countries? Why do these different drama situations occur? These are the issues this essay will discuss on.

## 2. Literature Review

It can be found by searching “Chinese and western drama” in CJN (China Journal Net) that there were two thesis that compared the Chinese and western drama taking “Chinese and western drama” as the theme in 1985. From then on, the number of this kind of thesis increased year on year, which indicates that researchers have attached importance to the comparison of Chinese and western drama.

However, majority of the thesis comparing Chinese and western drama focuses on the cultural background, origin, audiences’ aesthetics, plots, endings and realistic and emotional writing while few of them have compared the Chinese and western drama from religious perspective.

It can be indicated from the study results in CJN that there is only one thesis that particularly discusses the comparison of religious factor in Chinese and western drama. The thesis is *Interpretation of the Religious Elements in Chinese and Western Drama* written by Liao Min, who discussed the religious influence on writers' aesthetics and value. She thought that religion creates the artistic expression forms to a large extent and internalize it into the unique drama stylization and significant aesthetic feature (Liao, 2009). She studied the religious influence on drama creation from creation emotion, plot mode and aesthetic mechanism, which provided religious factor influence for further studies and had certain pioneering. Liao Min, however, failed to study the religion development and theme affected by Chinese and western religions deeply.

### **3. The Relationship between Religions and the Origin, Stage Form and Development of Chinese and Western Drama**

#### *2.1 The Religious Influence on Origin and Stage Form of Chinese and Western Drama*

In terms of drama origin, both Chinese and western drama have indissoluble bound with witchcraft, for example, the drama of ancient Greek was produced in memory of Dionysus and the rudiment of Chinese earliest drama presented a kind of witchcraft activity. The ritualized witchcraft is the general expression of human early civilization, many of which derived from witchcraft activities. However, the ancient Greek created complete dramatic performance in the rite to commemorate Dionysus while at the same time China had no complete drama though the dramatic factors have already appeared in the witchcraft expressions. The ancient drama creation activities gradually raised from the worship activities, but there were no proper religion at that time because they were in the period of polytheistic worship. The religion that really has profound influence on western drama is Christianity.

Both the Chinese and western Buddhism and Christianity have profound effect on drama stage. Chinese drama, the same as other drama types, derived from witchcraft. After the introduction of Buddhism into China, the thematic and artistic forms became mature gradually. The Chinese drama often displays at the gate of temples. The architectural pattern in China is facing south, so the drama displaying in front of the temple is for the deities as the icons in the temple. Therefore, the drama performances were facing the north at that time in order that the deities could watch them, which led to the drama stage facing the north and building at the gate of many important buildings. Afterwards, these drama stages were settled in the Chinese important courtyard patterns. For example, the drama stage of Shan-Shan Guildhall in Liaocheng, Shandong Province is built in front of the courtyard to display for deities in the main hall. The stage form of western drama is deeply affected by religion as well. For instance, in the tour of religious drama in middle ages, the stage was usually divided into three layers: there were machines and equipment in the upper layer to hang the actors in the air acting as the gods in heaven; the middle layer represented the world and the down layer presented the hell.

#### *2.2 The Religious Influence on the Development of Chinese and Western Drama*

Christianity was a branch of Judaism and abstinence is the feature of Christianity. In 476 AD, with the fall of Roman Empire, the western middle ages with Christianity as the main feature began to rise. In early middle ages, the Christianity thought that the drama represented the devil so it forbade the creation and performance. Therefore, although the ancient drama is the earliest drama in the world with numerous creators and talented works, the drama creation disappeared since middle ages.

In the middle and later periods of middle ages, the Christian church realized that the drama played an important role in advocating the religion, so it began to encourage drama creation instead of prohibition. Certainly, most of the dramas at that time were religious dramas. There were religious dramas in important festivals organized by the church every year. The drama continued to develop with the help of western church and gradually got rid of the church advocating intention, but there were still the shadow of religion at the creation form.

The history of western middle ages lasted approximately 1000 years from 476 AD to 1453. Because of the strong influence of Christianity, the western culture, society and politics presented integrated color but the literature creation was dull for this strict integration.

This period in China was from Wei, Jin, Northern and Southern Dynasties to Ming Dynasty, in which there were colorful literature creations and talents. In the domain of drama creation, there were Guan Hanqing, Wang Shipu, GaoZecheng and Tang Xianzu. The most important reason that caused the big difference between Chinese and western drama is the religious difference. Religion had great influence on the appearing of complete and meaningful Chinese drama.

The Buddhist was introduced into China from India before or after the Christian era. At the beginning, the introduction of Buddhism did not arouse the attention from dominators till the Jin and Southern-Northern

Dynasties where the Buddhism made great progress in China. It mainly presents that many dominators at that time, such as the emperors of Northern, Song, Qi, Liang, Chen dynasties believed in Buddhism, some of whom even became a monk. The support of emperors contributed to the development of Buddhism in China. Some of the splendid Buddhist architecture and sculptures were produced in that era. Afterwards, the Sui, Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties protected the Buddhism and many dominators were Buddhist believers.

It can be seen that the Buddhism has profound significance to Chinese history. It also has great influence on Chinese drama. At the beginning of the introduction of Buddhism, the Buddhism was urgent to adapt to the Confucian and the Taoism, and advocated the doctrine using drama to enlarge the effect in order to set a solid foundation and resist the rejection from them. The Buddhism prevailed the way of singing the drama plot to interpreting the Buddhist doctrine particularly in Tang and the Five Dynasties. In the civil spread process, talking and singing style came out to tell Buddhist stories, which led to the combination of singing and narrating in later drama forms. This style expanded the Chinese drama creation space and got rid of the original dull and plain drawback. The allegory and stories in the Buddhism also enriched the expressive force of Chinese drama. With the influence of Buddhism, the realm of Chinese drama was enlarged and the materials were sufficient.

It can be seen from above comparison that the influences of western Christianity and Chinese Buddhism on the drama development from middle ages are totally different. In western countries, the Christianity plays an inhabitation role to drama creation while in China the Buddhism has positive effect on drama creation.

Although the Christianity has gradually realized the advocating effect of drama on religious doctrine and started to advocate that with drama in the middle and later period of middle ages, audiences failed to see sufficient drama expressions from these dramas.

Buddhism and Christianity both advocate abstinence, but the Chinese drama affected by Buddhism attracts people's attention on mundane life and combines it with Buddhism while the drama affected by Christianity tries to arouse people's attention on a higher place, making effort to get rid of the mundane life. Therefore, the religious drama affected by Christianity lacks vivid mundane life expressions because of the bondage of religious factors.

#### **4. The Influence of Religion on the Themes of Chinese and Western Drama Writing**

Buddhism and Christianity drew the sights of the audience to secular world and the Kingdom of Heaven respectively in medieval times, and that caused the great differences of the themes of Chinese and western drama.

One of the obvious differences is the description of the ghost in drama. The earliest word describes the hell is the word *youtu* that appeared in the Qu Yuan's poem in the Warring States Time, the poet thought anyone would go to *youtu* after he or she died. But before the Buddhism was spread in China, the consciousness of ghost in China is not obvious. The stories about the ghost became more and more with the prosperity of Buddhism in China.

In the western world, the consciousness of ghost was not very obvious before the rise of Christianity. The Christianity is one branch of Judaism in the beginning. The orthodox Judaism denied the ghosts after the death of people, but the Christianity believed the ghosts of human being would go to another world.

This shows the consciousness of ghost became popular because of the Buddhism and Christianity in China and the west respectively. So, what about the appearances of ghost in Chinese and western drama?

In many ancient Chinese dramas, the plot of ghost is critical for the whole story. That provides a legendary factor for the drama, and in the tragedies, it facilitates the happy ending. For example, the spirit would free itself from the body because of missing sweetheart, and the ghost would continue to go to law against the evildoer after the protagonist is persecuted to death. It is also obvious that the ghost appears in the western drama. But what is remarkable is that the ghost in the western drama always tries to draw the sight of the audience to an superorganic world, which is totally different from the Chinese drama writing. For example, the ghost in the western drama would show the experience in another world after human being death, especially in the religious drama.

From such perspective, in medieval age, the drama which influenced by the Buddhism tells the stories about a secular world and focuses on the mouse and man. But the religious drama influenced by the Christianity rarely tells such stories.

The Buddhism theme dramas are numerous, which could be divided as four kinds: "The first is about how the leaders of the Buddhism reached the spiritual state of an immortal as last by hard practice. The second is about the boundless superpower and justice of Buddhism, which make the good and evil get the deserved retribution

respectively. The third is about the matters happened between the Buddhism figures or between the monks and laymen. The fourth is about the filthy matters happened in the Buddhist circle”(Zhu, 2008). In China, the dramas about the Buddhism are overwhelming, because the Buddhism permeates in the ordinary life for one thing, on the other hand, the monks or the believers of Buddhism tries to propagate the Buddhism by the drama. But the Buddhism plots in such dramas are always tell the stories about the secular world mainly, even in the need of propagating the Buddhism, the plots would always tell the results of the protagonists in the secular world.

So in the specific Chinese drama writing, the consciousness of ghost in Buddhism is introduced for the plot in order to tell the stories about the secular world. For example, in *Snow in Midsummer* and *Peony Pavilion* etc, there are description of ghosts. Without such ghosts, the stories would not come into being. In Chinese tragedies, the protagonists are always noble and unprejudiced and restrain themselves for others. There is no shortcoming in such protagonists. It is unreasonable for such protagonists to fall into disaster. So the in the end of the drama the it would tell the protagonists reap what they sow. As ancient Chinese dramas, in most cases, the happy ending is achieved by the plots of ghosts.

In the west, the drama writing turned to describe the secular world after the medieval age. Although the Renaissance is known as a time in which people tend to unbelieve the religion, the Christianity still influenced the drama writing. Take Shakespeare for example, his drama writing embodied the influence of Christianity more obviously. “In the earlier stage, Shakespear unconsciously adopted the style of Christianity in the specific cultural environment, and in the later stage, he adopted the Christianity style in life actively. That appeared as a strong consciousness of destiny, sin and complex of confession and transcendence” (Xiao, 2006).

In the Renaissance time, the Christianity concepts of nature and ethic were swayed in the daily life of Europe. Another kind of life style thriving subtly, but Shakespeare noticed such different trend and exposed the unreasonable desire of human being. He tried to hold the self-aggrandizement and extreme expansion of desire by the Christianity factors he adopted. His tragedies, especially in his later stage, are about the vice and limitation of human nature, and that is interlinked with Christianity. Lots of images, symbols and rites were originated from Christianity, and the themes of his dramas could also be found as influenced by Christianity deeply. Although the dramas of Shakespeare are different from the religious dramas in medieval age, Shakespeare’s dramas inherited many factors in the religious dramas. Many actor’s lines and drama plots are originated from Christianity, and the most important is the spiritual meaning of the dramas is influenced by Christianity.

The consciousness of sin and transcendence of Christianity influences the themes of western dramas deeply, so even in the Renaissance time, many writers did not create the religious dramas, but the consciousness of sin and transcendence still played an important role in the drama writing.

And the influence of Buddhism on Chinese drama is embodied in the karma and ghost plots in the drama. The greatest difference is that in Chinese tragedy has the happy ending as influenced by the Buddhism. Chinese drama draws the sight of the audience to the secular and mundane world and has more entertainment factors. But the western drama tries to make the audience think about the superorganic world. In the medieval age, the drama was forbidden in the first, but later the drama was used as a tool to propagate the doctrines of Christianity. In the Renaissance, the Christianity factors still were very important in the drama. Although many of the dramas in the Renaissance time were secular, the drama still showed some factors of transcendence.

### **5. The Cause of Differences between Buddhism and Christianity Influences on Drama**

In order to discuss the differences between the Buddhism and Christianity influence on drama, it is necessary to find the differences between the Buddhism and Christianity.

The doctrines of Buddhism and Christianity are different, besides, their relationships with the believers are different. When talked about the difference between Chinese and American religious faith, Fei Hsiao-tung said: “We are pragmatic when we deal with the ghosts and gods. We enshrine and worship them for good weather for the crops and escaping away from the evil. The sacrifice is like entertaining the guests, mediation and bribery. The pray of used is to make a vow and beg. For us, the ghosts and gods are the power, not ideal; the financial source, not justice” (Fei, 1985).

The relationship between God and believers in Christianity rarely has such utilitarian color. Contrast to the secular factors in Chinese drama, the western drama especially the tragedy implies the seeking for the sublime and truth. To take the *Snow in Midsummer* and *Chinese Orphan* for examples, it is obvious that Chinese drama seldom show the lofty beauty. In Chinese drama, the hidden rules are recognized as a matter of course. The effects of Chinese drama are entertaining the audience and such drama would have the happy ending to gain such

effects. From this point, the plots of Chinese drama show the similar relationship between the Buddhism and believers. Just as the relationship between the Buddhism and believers is utilitarian mainly, the relationship between the protagonists in the drama is also utilitarian, the same as the relationship between the drama and the audience. That is utterly another perspective in the western drama. The ancient Greek tragedy performs functions of catharsis but not entertainment. With the influence of Christianity, the functions of catharsis imply such religious consciousness of sin, transcendence and confession etc, even if such drama has disastrous ending. And such factors of western drama are incredible for the audience who used to admiring the traditional Chinese drama which always has happy ending.

“When the folk believers in China sacrifice, confess and pray, just as the Americans do, the sacrifice becomes the histrionism. The confession becomes self-examination. The pray implies something like threatening” (Ge, 1998). So, in Chinese drama, it is necessary to have a happy ending.

In Chinese Yuan poetic drama, there are numerous and all kinds of figures of Chinese religion, such as king of hell, goblin, the Eight Immortals, Buddhism nuns and monks etc. Many figures of different religions would appear in one drama, and that is different from the western drama. In China, if only the religious figures are thought as privilege the believers, the believers would worship such figures. The phenomenon of polytheistic worship is very popular. The doctrines and belief are not important, and the practice and experience are important. Chinese religion belief is founded on the utilitarian goal. So, “Chinese people are superstitious, and they believe, but rarely firmly believe” (Lu, 1985). So, there are many kinds of gods in Chinese folk. For example, Zongli and Liuqun’s *Chinese folk Gods* cite more than three hundred kinds of gods (Zong & Liu, 1987).

The gods are graded and they also have the pleasure, anger, sorrow, joy etc., just as human being. In fact, the gods are the result of project of real social life. “Although China is not short of the regime and ability to construct the regime, Chinese people, no matter small tradesmen and porters or generals and ministers of state, value the personal quality and ability of the rulers rather than others. The tradition of rule by man is not only in the meaning of regime system, but also in the meaning of secular custom” (Zhang, 2003). The fact is projected in the drama as the social relationship in the gods just like the social relationship in the real world of China. The drama propagates more secular social relationship than the religious doctrines. Many religious figures such as monks, Buddhism nuns, Taoist priests and immortals also take bribes just as ordinary rulers in real society. They have all kinds of passions and are never short of the secular desires for wine, beauties, wealth. In such drama, the monks would eat meat and drink, and the Buddhism nuns are still confused by the mundane lust, and the immortals hesitate to tell the truth because they are bribed.....

Contrast to Chinese drama, the western drama deal with the religion more prudentially. In medieval age, the church presided the theatrics totally, and the drama’s goal was to propagate the religious doctrines. The themes of the drama were always drawn from the Bible and the theatrics were carried out in the churches in the earlier stage of medieval age. In the later stage of medieval age, the theaters were moved out from the churches because of the rising expense for maintaining the theatre. But the influence of the church stayed in the drama deeply, besides, the regime system does not rely on the rule by man. So what the western drama focuses on is different from Chinese drama.

This shows the great differences between the influences of Chinese religions and western Christianity on the drama. No matter the Christianity opposed or proposed the drama, it is always originated from the zest for religion. Although the religion enriches Chinese drama’s plots and themes, the consciousness of transcendence, sin and confession rarely appears in Chinese drama. What the Chinese drama portrayed is the mundane and secular world, the religious doctrines is minor in Chinese drama.

The religious rites and the drama have similarity in China and western world. The Buddhism rites in China are utilitarian, but in the Christianity rites, the believers worship and honor the God. The rites draw the believers’ sight to the metaphysical world. Just like the difference of religious rites, the drama of China and west are also different with each other. Compared with the western drama, Chinese drama focuses more on this-worldly. “Most of Chinese people are confused by the Christians’ allegation that the life is for the next world” (Lin, 1988). The idea is also projected in Chinese drama.

## 6. Conclusion

The origins of Chinese and western drama are closely bound up with the religions. From the medieval age, the Buddhism and Christianity influenced the development of Chinese and western dramas respectively. Because of the different doctrines and ways to propagate the doctrines, the Chinese and western dramas have great difference with each other under the influence of different religions.

In the medieval age, western drama was impeded by the religion, but the religion enriched Chinese drama. In the Renaissance, compared to Chinese drama, western drama became popular and had the strong consciousness of transcendence, sin and confession under the influence of the Christianity.

That is totally different with the Chinese drama to portray the mundane world. In Chinese drama, religion is utilitarian. The folk Buddhism is on part of the mundane life. The Buddhism factors in Chinese drama is for the representation of the mundane world, and it is not originated from the zest of religion. Even the plots of ghosts and gods are another form to tell the stories of worldling.

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