

# A Research on the Origins of Ritual Theatre in Eastern Asia: The Associative Development of Chinese Nuo Theatre and Japanese Noh Theatre

*Chen Kexu*

Department of Theatre and Performance, Goldsmiths University of London

serina1997ckx@163.com

**Abstract.** As a region with a significant agricultural industry, the ritual theatre of East Asia played an important role in the early drama of its origins. In addition, the trajectory of the early agricultural and religious cultural interactions in East Asian countries was decisive in shaping their national cultural roots, so exploring the different developments of ritual theatre among different countries on the basis of the history of early cultural interactions can help to provide a more explicit understanding of the cultural development of ritual theatre in East Asia. This research explores the trajectories of Nuo theatre in China and Noh theatre in Japan, broadly in terms of both agriculture and religion, summarises the similarities and differences between the developmental routes of Nuo and Noh theatre, and analyses the causes of the contemporary phenomenon of Nuo and Noh theatre moving along different developmental routes.

**Keywords:** Nuo Theatre, Noh Theatre, agricultural society, Shamanism, ritual theatre

## 1. Functional Rituals: The Appendages of An Agricultural Society

The early socio-economic development of East Asian countries was generally based on an agrarian economy, with artisanal agriculture as the main origin [1]. Under the influence of this economic model and the unique cultural structure of East Asia, a number of cultural accessories emerged, of which ritual theatre is a representative example. According to the concept of "ritual theatre", it is believed that rituals originated from the concept of "animism" during the Enlightenment period, which manifested itself in soul worship, nature worship, ancestor worship, and extended to the collective worship of tribes and even nations. The theatrical elements in the rituals relate to the primitive theatrical phenomenon and its cultural origins [2]. In the early agrarian period, farming activities in East Asia were often accompanied by a series of rituals in which the hosts sang and danced in masks to pray to the gods or to nature for a good agricultural harvest, in the form of prayers for abundant rain and dew, and so on. Although the rituals of this period were already of an entertaining nature, their main purpose was still their functionality, which, combined with the lack of a well-structured plot and a systematic artistic approach, made them conceptually different from contemporary ritual theatre. Franco Ruffini defined these plays in 2005: he called them "chiavi di teatro", that is to say, key episodes that could be the centre or main scenes of the drama. However, they lack action, they lack the dramatic development of a complete drama, they are clearly not properly contextualised, and they have no traditional conclusion [3]. The development of a predominantly rice-growing agricultural industry in East Asia was accompanied by the development of a gradually stabilising agricultural farming industry in China before the eighth century AD, when the earliest indigenous formal ritual theatre type, Nuo opera, was born. Records of Nuo opera date back to the eighth century AD in Analects: Confucius watched a village Nuo opera performance in his native Shandong province. By this time, Nuo opera had developed over a long period of time and had been embellished with religious elements from Buddhism and Taoism. This ritual is usually led by a shaman (usually a priest or shaman) and takes place at the end of the Chinese lunar year (January to February). During the Nuo ritual, the shaman usually wears a mask made of leather, wood or papier-mâché to portray the deities from various religious stories [4]. In this period of Nuo opera. The role of the shaman was no longer that of an absolute presenter, but gradually transitioned to the nature of an actor.

By the early 8th century AD, the Chinese Tang Dynasty and Japan had close diplomatic relations. During this period, as rice cultivation was spread to Japan, Nuo opera, which was part of the communal activities of the agricultural society, also entered the realm of Japanese ritual culture. Thus, the earliest ritual theatre in Japan can be traced back to the late Jomon era (ending c.300

b.c.e.). A representative example of early Japanese ritual theatre with Nuo characteristics is the early Japanese tsuina rite, a ritual that incorporates many of the features of Nuo and is therefore quite similar to Nuo in its presentation and functionality. In contemporary research, it is generally accepted that the early Japanese tsuina rite was a precursor to contemporary Japanese Noh theatre [5]. Thus, Chinese Nuo opera and Japanese Noh opera can trace their cultural roots very closely in the history of their development.

Nuo opera has its origins in China in the ancient times, developing from the theme of rituals to pray for natural refuge and to ward off ghosts and spirits. The presenter of the ritual was called Fang Xiang Style and played the role of being able to communicate with the spirits and gods. It is written in the Rites of the Zhou that "Fang Xiang Shi had a bear skin over his hands, had four golden eyes, wore red clothes, carried a spear and shield, and led a large number of soldiers and generals to preside over the ritual to perform the exorcism of the plague." Once the Nuo ritual begins, all participate enthusiastically, from the emperor to the common people. During this time participants beat drums and cheered with great pomp and circumstance. According to Kuji kongen, a Japanese public affairs and ritual source, in 705 AD, an early Japanese Tsuina ritual featured Hososhi, who functioned similarly to a Fang Sang-style character, wearing a terrifying mask with four golden eyes, dressed in red and carrying a spear and shield, followed by twenty virgin adolescents. At the end of the ritual, Hososhi strikes his shield three times with his spear, and then the surrounding crowd sings loudly together [6]. It is thus clear that in a historical period when similar patterns of economic development existed in China and Japan, the early Tsuina Rite and the Nuo ritual already had remarkably similar expressive characteristics as functional social rituals before each developed into a formal theatrical mode. With socio-economic development, the East Asian region gradually moved away from dependence on primary industries, and agriculture has become less of a part of the East Asian socio-economic structure than it was in the earlier Tsuina and Nuo ritual eras. During this period of development, Tsuina Rite and Nuo opera weakened their functional character and developed an entertaining quality, which gradually led to the development of Tsuina Rite and Nuo opera from purely functional rituals to theatrical activities with an entertaining and educational character. In the process of this development, Tsuina Rite was gradually transformed into the predecessor form of contemporary Noh theatre, so that traces of Tsuina Rite are still present in the ideology and stage presentation of contemporary Japanese Noh theatre, such as the use of masks on stage. Chinese Nuo rituals, on the other hand, gradually developed into a separate theatrical genre at the time, later known as Nuo opera, which became popular around the south-western region of China. Although both based on rituals in the same economic context, Nuo opera and Neng opera in their later, near-mature forms also each developed distinct national characteristics in terms of the proportion of functionality and specific stage style, and did not appear to be very similar, as they grew up in different cultural soils.

## 2. Shamanic Culture: Orientalist Cosmology in Ritual Drama

Shamanism is a native religion based on the belief in gods and spirits, and today traces of it can be traced in the folklore cultures of different peoples. The origins of shamanism are unknown and the earliest historical traces of it are found in Western Europe [7], so although shamanic culture appears frequently in the rituals of the ancient East, it does not appear to be a culture indigenous to the East in its derivation. From the initial stages of the development of Japanese indigenous theatre, shamanic culture has shown some traces of its existence. A number of traditional Japanese plays have been shown to be the product of a fusion of traditional Japanese performance forms with shamanic culture. According to E. T. Kirby: "both noh and kagura share a common antecedent in shamanic possession and ritual performance." [8] The development of theatre with shamanic rituals in China has largely followed the development of Nuo opera. At a time when Nuo opera was the dominant form of performance, the existence of Chinese theatre was largely dependent on the functional significance of the shamanic ritual itself. As theatre developed in form and maturity, ritual theatre with shamanic characteristics, mainly Nuo opera, gradually moved into the realm of regional folk culture, and the status of mainstream performance art was gradually replaced by more entertaining types of theatre. In this trend, ritual theatre with shamanic culture has not developed in a widespread manner in China, but because of its early historical beginnings, it is also more widely distributed geographically than ordinary regional folk culture. To this day, shamanic ritual theatre exists from south-western China to Tibet.

The rituals of shamanism are based on the exorcism of demons, and the background of the stories performed are mostly based on the legends of ghosts and gods. It is thus clear that the teachings of shamanism are based on a particular set of worldviews. It is a common practice in religiosity to circumvent the rules of conventional life and to create a special parallel world view. This can be seen as an ideological guide for those in power within the rules of religious operation, using unique narrative devices. Although this is an illusory simulation of the objective natural world, it is also, by its very nature, based on the subjective power of human discourse. According to Herbert Fingarette, this parallel-world-like operation of the religious world audience is derived from a subjective human narrative of meaning. In his provocative study of Confucius, seems to have a very similar distinction in mind when discussing "memory narratives" and "meaning narratives." "9 Like ethos, memory narratives in human like ethos, memory narratives in human discourse provide or shape a "real" and ordinary /historical world out of living memory. Like mythos, meaning narratives in human discourse shape a parallel but transcendent "world" which pro-vides a fundamental meaning for all aspects of life and are a source of true significance [9].

According to the shamanic view of the universe, the world consists of three dimensions: the underworld, the human world and the heavenly world [10]. Such a cosmology is expressed in different religious cultures, such as Buddhism in the East and Catholicism in the West, where opposing concepts of space such as hell and heaven exist. In different religious contexts, different theological legends are based on such a three-tiered, differentiated cosmology. In the shamanic cosmology, especially for

shamanic exorcism, the underworld is the main object of representation, because the demonised objects targeted in the exorcism rituals are mainly from the underworld, represented by negative demonic images. The underworld in shamanic teachings has a similar symbolic meaning to that of hell in Catholic teachings, as it is a virtual space in which negative phenomena can be represented in a religious sense. Although there is a commonality of rules between the East and the West in the establishment of a religious worldview, there are subtle differences between the different cultural roots in terms of their influence on theatrical representation. In the case of Noh, for example, the influence of Orientalist teachings such as shamanism and Buddhism has led to a view of the universe and theatrical narrative that is more in line with traditional Eastern mysticism, especially in the narrative, which is more focused on the deification of the gods themselves rather than on specific events, as in the case of the Bible, which lays out the teachings of the religion. In response to these two different styles of religious dramatic presentation, Nakamura Yasuo's view suggests that "in Western drama, something happens; in Noh, someone appears." [11] This conveys a kind of religious poetry embedded in Noh drama under the influence of religious elements. Orientalist tendencies of religious poetry.

In early East Asian theatre, especially in China and Japan, where ritual theatre culture developed earlier, a shamanistic cosmology is relatively obvious. A representative common feature of Nuo and Noh theatre, the mask, is an outwardly embodied manifestation of the shamanic cosmology. In Chinese shamanic rituals, the masked performer represents the person who subdues the demons, and Zhong Kui is a representative character. In Japanese shamanic theatre, the corresponding character is called Shoki [12], so it is clear that in the development of Nuo and Noh theatre they both follow a common cosmology - the shamanic doctrine of the differentiation of the three worlds and the concept of ghosts and gods - and have developed a very similar system of performance roles. Although Neng Opera and Nuo Opera share similar cultural roots and developmental processes, they also had their own early functional developmental directions and characteristics. The common perception is that Noh originated from another ancient traditional Japanese theatre form, sarugaku, but Suwa Haruo expresses a different view, arguing that sarugaku is not the original template from which Noh originated. Suwa contends that it is "a misunderstanding" that Noh originated directly from sarugaku [2].

According to Suwa Haruo, there was a predecessor stage called kiri-Noh before Noh theatre had fully developed into a mature Noh performance system. Early Noh drama was dominated by kiri-Noh, which was softer in its expression of the main theme than the ritual drama of the agrarian period, in which the expulsion of the plague and the claim to nature were weakened in favour of an expression of appeasement and consolation to the spirits. A glimpse of this intrinsic characteristic of early Noh theatre can be found in Okina sarugaku's performances [2]. Throughout the development of Noh theatre, from its ritual origins to the contemporary Noh theatre as a mature system, the mask has always had a special and irreplaceable place, and has gradually evolved into one of the performance symbols of Noh theatre. In terms of the significance of the mask as a cultural symbol for Noh theatre performance, it has been analysed that the act of putting on the mask completes the dissolution of the self and the identification with the divine or demonic other [2].

Since they both originate from the ritual theatre of the ancient period, Nuo opera and Neng opera share similar characteristics in terms of textual themes and core theatrical values. The theme of realism, reflecting the current social landscape, is a topic of expression that is addressed in different types of theatre of all times and nationalities, but ritual theatre has little to no expression of realistic themes. In the case of ritual theatre, the themes they express essentially follow a religious sense of mission within a specific space of existence that has been erected, due to the deification of the blueprint of the story. Moreover, the homogeneity of the core theatrical expressions, with fixed themes derived from myths and legends with the same thematic orientation and world view, makes the ritual theatre more oriented towards the qualities of epic theatre, such as fictionality and grand narrative. Such characteristics make the category of ritual theatre relatively compatible with shamanism, which is a more prominent expression of a theological worldview, in its core expression. Regarding the intrinsic connection between Japanese noh drama and theology, Ralph Abraham argues: "As seen in the noh mask, moreover, the shite of various plays is overwhelmingly non-ordinary beings from sacred worlds, and their appearance constitutes a theophanic event." [13] It is thus clear that the main body of representation in noh drama is dominated by theological events, and that these narrative expressions of theology. The narrative representation of theology can be seen as a kind of historical re-enactment in the religious sense. As they are both representative origins of ritual theatre, Nuo and Noh share the same narrative and thematic characteristics, and it can be seen that both Chinese Nuo and Japanese Noh theatre aim to represent a narrative re-enactment of a theological epic.

### 3. Folk and Court: Literary Ritual Theatre in Various Trends

At the beginning of their development, Chinese Nuo opera and Japanese Noh opera maintained a relatively unified rhythm of development due to their essentially identical social functions and similar cultural roots, as well as their regionally specific oriental mysticism values. In contemporary times, however, Noh theatre and Nuo theatre have developed in very different ways: Noh theatre has developed a more systematic performance system and has become a representative symbol of Japanese theatre culture, with ten dedicated Noh theatres surviving in Japan today, while Nuo theatre has now disappeared from the formal theatre scene, and there are few Nuo theatres as a performing art in folklore, which has gradually become a folk cultural heritage as a subject of historical research. The reasons why two ritual theatres with the same roots have developed in very different directions are complex, and most of them are based on objective social factors at the historical level.

In the early stages of the development of Nuo opera and Neng opera, they both underwent a common period of transformation: a humanisation of the overall style of the drama, including its cultural core as well as its external imagery. According to historical records on the origins of Nuo opera: there is a temporal continuity between the Chinese Song and Yuan dynasties and the Japanese

medieval Mulian Theatre [14]. It can be seen that up to this period, Chinese Nuo opera and Japanese Noh opera were temporarily converging in terms of development trends. In terms of external performance forms, both Nuo and Noh theatre were still in the stage of court ritual theatre and were aimed at the class groups of the time who were in power. In addition, some of the symbolic imagery in theatrical performance began to develop in a humanising direction. For example, the twelve zodiac signs and the Hososhi were gradually replaced by symbols with a clear subjective consciousness and personality, such as the judge Zhong Kui [16]. This personification of symbolic characters gave Nuo and Neng plays a more complex human character, which marked their gradual transition from a ritual to a form of theatre as a performing art. In terms of cultural core, Japanese culture was heavily influenced by Buddhism in the following Song and Yuan dynasties, as the monk Jianzhen crossed over to Japan during the Tang dynasty. Thus, some traces of the influence of Buddhist teachings can be seen in the trajectory of theatre development in both China and Japan during this period. For Noh theatre, this is most evident in the Zeami period, whose dramatic works were so heavily weighted towards the promotion of Buddhist doctrine, coupled with his iconic and ground-breaking contribution to the development of Noh theatre, that, according to Suwa Haruo, one of the key aspects of the series of developments in Noh theatre during the Zeami period was the transformation of: the exorcism of evil spirits by TSUINA into Mugennoh's prayer for the happiness and peace of the spirits of the dead [2]. As with the transformation of the personification of symbolic characters in external form, this shift in the inner tendencies of culture has furthered the humanistic qualities of Nuo opera and Noh drama as theatre itself. For this series of transformations in Noh theatre, Suwa Haruo argues that they were not achieved independently in Japan, and that such transformations are consistent with the exorcism rituals of mainland China [2].

After this stage, Nuo opera and Neng opera showed different development trends. During the Tang dynasty China began to develop small operas of song and dance, and by the Song and Yuan dynasties the Chinese theatre scene, dominated by Song lyrics and Yuan songs, had shown a rapid trend towards entertainment and commercialisation. Against this backdrop, courtly Nuo operas, which were mainly ritualistic and functional and aimed at the ruling class, did not enter the theatre market of the time. By the end of the Yuan and early Ming dynasties, Chinese theatre had diversified, and against this background there was a brief revival of Nuo opera. At the time, this period of revival was a positive development for Nuo opera [2], as it was a rebellion against the traditional courtly style, which could be seen as an adaptation of Nuo opera to the cultural trend of civilianisation of theatre. During this transformation, as the field of shamanic activity shifted to Tibet, Nuo opera incorporated more elements of Tibetan exorcism rituals and gradually transitioned into a folk style of performance [4]. In terms of functionality, folk Nuo opera has weakened some of its original serious performance forms and functions compared to traditional court Nuo opera due to the need for entertainment in folk performances. Although this stylistic shift from court to folk brought about a brief period of recovery, Nuo opera did not fully enter the theatre market at the time as the Chinese theatre market was very diverse and Nuo opera merely responded to the market stylistically without developing a clear trend towards systematisation and commercialisation. After this brief period of revival, the transformed folk Nuo opera gradually moved away from the market-oriented theatre and into the direction of folk heritage, so that a more large-scale and systematic performance system did not follow.

Unlike Nuo theatre, Noh theatre gradually moved towards a stable and systematic pattern of development after this period, the most decisive factor being the support of the Japanese court. Although Noh did not, for the time being, remove elements of court theatre as completely as Nuo, it developed beyond the purely serviceable nature of court rituals to a national iconic performance culture. Thanks to the support of the court, Neng opera avoided the constraints of the market economy for a long time in its development process, and was therefore given more freedom to develop and retain more original elements of performance culture than Nuo opera, which tried to cater to the market during the same period. On the other hand, Neng Opera has more subtly considered the integration of realistic elements in its transition from traditional models to contemporary performance forms. This fusion of contemporary reality is not a cutting of tradition, but a combination of contemporary values and traditional forms of Noh theatre performance. Relevant studies of contemporary noh theatre suggest that the most "contemporary" ( genzai ) noh plays as serving "the purpose of the theatre in creating the sense of felt life" [15]. It can be seen that the modernisation and reform of noh theatre was a successful attempt compared to noh theatre. This is another important factor in the survival of Neng Opera as a traditional ritual theatre and its development into an iconic national cultural symbol.

## 4. Conclusion

Due to the propagation of the agricultural economy, Chinese Nuo theatre and Japanese Noh theatre belonged to a co-evolving agricultural appendage and could therefore be considered as ritual theatre of the exact same origin. And since the early development of agrarian societies and the consistency of the religious genres to which they were influenced, the early developmental processes of Nuo and Noh theatre exhibit a certain degree of commonality. However, owing to the varying circumstances of the entire theatrical development of China and Japan, as well as the objective factors such as the different measures taken by the governing class, Chinese Nuo theatre and Japanese Noh theatre eventually developed along opposite paths and presented contrasting developmental situations. From this comparative research it is generally possible to observe the different development of Nuo and Noh theatre as homogenous theatre, and to provide an analysis of selected key factors in the transformation of traditional ritual theatre into contemporary theatre.

## References

- [1] Smith, T.C., & American Council of Learned Societies. (1959). *The agrarian origins of modern Japan*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.
- [2] Tian, M. (2003). Chinese Nuo and Japanese Noh: Nuo's Role in the Origination and Formation of Noh. *Comparative Drama*, 37(3/4), 343–360.
- [3] Luppi, F. (2012). The Smart Wizard: Literature as a Lie, Theatre as a Rite (Giorgio Manganelli reads W.B. Yeats). *Studi Irlandesi*, (2), 125–141.
- [4] Qu, L. (1989). China's Nuo Theatre: Two Views. *TDR*, 33(3), 103.
- [5] Pilgrim, R.B. (1989). The Japanese Noh Drama in Ritual Perspective. *The Eastern Buddhist*, 22(1), 54–70.
- [6] Anon. (2013). A Reassessment of the Place of Shamanism in the Origins of Chinese Theater. *Journal of American Oriental Society*, 133(1), 93–109.
- [7] Beeman, W.O. (1993). The Anthropology of Theater and Spectacle. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 22(1), 369–393.
- [8] Shun-Yee, H. (2008). Pre-Confucian Chinese Beliefs as Reflected by the Religious Symbols in the Book of Poetry. *Ching Feng*, 9(1/2), 71–102.
- [9] Macdonald, M.N. (2002). THE STUDY OF SHAMANISM: LOCAL AND UNIVERSAL DIMENSIONS. *Journal of Ritual Studies*, 16(2), 88–107.
- [10] Goodman, D. (1973). Noh. The Classical Theater (Book Review). *Books Abroad*, 47(1), 223.
- [11] Ortolani, B. (1984). Shamanism in the Origins of the Nō Theatre. *Asian Theatre Journal*, 1(2), 166–190.
- [12] Abraham, R. (2015). Shamanism and Noh.
- [13] Yu, S.-L. (2019). From Religious Rituals to Popular Theatre: Evolution of the Mulian Legend. *Ecumenica*, 12(2), 65–82.
- [14] Ortolani, B. (1984). Shamanism in the Origins of the Nō Theatre. *Asian Theatre Journal*, 1(2), 166–190.
- [15] Okamuro, M. (2009). BECKETT, YEATS, AND NOH: ...but the clouds... as Theatre of Evocation. *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, 21(1), 165–178,255.