

The Contemporary Transformation of Thematic Connotation and Narrative Mode of Peking Opera from ‘The Jewelry Purse’

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Abstract: Artistic creation in any era reflects the collective consciousness in the context of the era in which it is created. From the late Qing Dynasty to the Republic of China, Peking Opera has completed its transformation as a systematic performing art in the course of historical changes, while retaining its unique cultural heritage and traditional performance forms. This paper adopts the typical text *The Jewelry Purse* as the research subject in the review of the history of Peking Opera, conducts an in-depth analysis of the development of Peking Opera. By deconstructing the text of *The Jewelry Purse*, refines the modernity of *The Jewelry Purse* as evidence for discussing the changes in the modernity of Peking Opera in terms of themes and narrative modes. Peking Opera intensifies the reflection on the real situation by reinforcing the gap between the ideal and real society in its development process. As one of the excellent examples of Peking Opera’s self-renewal and transcendence, *The Jewelry Purse* can be created and expressed through the creators’ and performers’ realization of the reality in which they live, and resonate with audiences of different times.

Keywords: Peking Opera, *The Jewelry Purse*, Cheng Yanqiu, Nature Tao, Modernity

1. Introduction

In the earliest years of the Republic of China, the variety of Peking Opera genres and the emergence of groups of artists enabled the art of Peking Opera to be gradually perfected and turned into a highly systematized form of performance. ‘No song without sound, no dance without movement’ is the essence of Peking Opera [1]. Peking Opera combines song, dance, and drama as forms of expression, which refers to the interpretation of stories through singing and dancing. Usually, the characters are portrayed with programmed actions, and the human nature is portrayed through singing (Chang), reciting (Nian), acting (Zuo) and martial arts (Da). The combination of scenery, props, and actions creates a meaningful and profound scene. Meanwhile, the stylization of the Peking Opera art is not a fixation of the Peking Opera art, and the innovation and enrichment of the Peking Opera scripts in the early years of the Republic of China is one of the manifestations of its continuous prosperity. As one of the four most famous Peking Opera artists and initiator of the Cheng School of Peking Opera, Cheng Yanqiu portrayed many classical roles in theatrical performance.

In 1939, Cheng Yanqiu was inspired by a section of ‘Zhichentan’ from Jiao Xun’s ‘Jushuo’ in the Qing Dynasty, discussed with Weng Ouhong to complete the script adaptation, and consulted with

Wang Yaoqing to refine the singing voice, and finally created *The Jewelry Purse*. The success of the creation and performance of *The Jewelry Purse* also reflects the process of the glorious development of the art of Peking Opera in 1930s era, in which the creators drew inspiration from the past, combining it with the context of the times and the collective consciousness to create a new opera, and incorporating into the performer's unique singing style into the performance. During this process, though the texts and vocal styles have changed, while as a systematic performing art, the cultural heritage of the traditional aesthetics of Peking Opera invariably remain.

Based on the deconstruction of *The Jewelry Purse* script, this paper discusses the contemporary changes in Peking Opera in terms of themes and narrative modes. And through the discussion of the mythological archetypes of the 'flood in Dengzhou' and its metaphor, as well as the spiritual death and rebirth of the main characters in the opera, this paper seeks to reveal the core of *The Jewelry Purse*, which is 'changes and constancy'. In terms of narrative, this paper also analyzes one plot of *The Jewelry Purse* which is 'Accidentally find the Kylin bag in red attic', and the delay at the end of the story to explore the support of modernity in Peking Opera mode. Finally, it summarizes the impact of modernity on the development of Peking Opera, pointing out the significance of its self-innovation and response to the times.

2. Modernizing Thinking in Thematic Connotation

2.1. Mythological archetypes and Metaphors of the Flood in Dengzhou Town

In mythology, the flood is not only a catastrophe that poses a great threat to human society, but also an imaginative embodiment of the reality of the human world, where things and fates are unpredictable. In the Old Covenant, Jehovah destroyed the world by flood because of the sins of man [2]. With a strong theistic orientation, the flood in the Bible emphasizes human's original evil which should be destroyed to bring humanity back to its right path [3]. In Chinese mythology, Gong Gong was defeated in a battle with Zhuan Xu, thus causing a flood [4]. Unlike the Bible, Chinese myths have not pointed out 'the original evil' as a deterrent to mankind but resulted in the concept of 'Zhuan Min sheng', which in ancient Chinese context means only docile and honest people could be alive after the disaster. The popularity and circulation of flood myths in different parts of the world can perhaps be seen as an archetypal projection of the psycho-cognitive development process of human beings, in which the emergence, expansion, frustration, and reconciliation of human self-consciousness, as a kind of 'collective unconscious', prompts people to continually illustrate and experience the flood myths [5].

Throughout the whole series of *The Jewelry Purse*, the flood in Dengzhou town is the turning point of the play. On the way back to her parents' home with her son, Xue Xiangling is informed that a sudden flood has submerged Dengzhou, thus making Xue Xiangling separated from her family. After surviving from the flood, Xue is displaced and starves like other victims in the disaster.

Under the background of social disorder, wealth and life loss in the flood, the spirit of heroism and altruism embodied in the mutual assistance to fight against destiny is invaluable. Moreover, the disaster of the flood mapped out the realistic background and the predicament of the times in which the author of *The Jewelry Purse* lived. The flood means the critical situation, that is the survival space for all the people in China being encroached upon by the foreign invaders, and no matter rich or poor, all are suffering from the same existential threat under the ravages of the war. In this environment, the playwright launched an appeal to all Chinese, whether rich or poor, only with benevolent thoughts and to help each other could let all escape from the crisis.

2.2. The Death and Rebirth of Xue Xiangling's Spirit

After undergoing a metamorphosis from rich to poor and becoming a servant of the young master, whose capriciousness reminded Xue Xiangling of her own son's unknown state of life or death. She uttered a poignant lament that is 'In a moment I realized the importance of life philosophy, I sobbed so bitterly that my garments were wetted. I knew how life should be destined, but nobody could expect what happened' [6]. At this moment, the former Xue Xiangling had died spiritually, and she was mentally prepared to accept reality and to spend the rest of her life drifting alone.

A spiritual death is not only a realization and understanding of the real world but also a reflection and awakening of the inner world. After experiencing all kinds of misfortunes, Xue Xiangling didn't blame others for the natural disasters, but sought internally from her heart and realized the metamorphosis of rebirth. This rebirth was a deepening of self-knowledge and self-understanding, as well as a transformation and enhancement of her attitude towards life. In addition, this philosophical speculation was not limited to the characters in the opera but was also the author's observation and reflection on the social reality. Ultimately, he wrote for Xue Xiangling, 'It was God that gave me a good lesson, it taught how to do in my life, such as no hating others, no willful, reflecting myself, controlling my temper, no tearing myself away from lost time, forgetting troubles, realizing cause and effect' [6]. As a result, the character of Xue Xiangling becomes stronger and fuller. As Weng describe that Mr. Cheng's need for *The Jewelry Purse* is a comedic mood of "Spring Breeze to home after a torrential rain", in addition to a happy reunion[7].

2.3. Changes and Constancy, Nature's Tao and Cause and Effect

After deconstructing *The Jewelry Purse*, there is an essential dark line running under the script: 'Changes and constancy' of the way of heaven. As ancient Chinese philosopher Xunzi describe that 'the way of heaven' is constantly standing, it doesn't exist for Yao (a great emperor in myth) or doesn't disappear for Jie (a famous tyrant of Xia Dynasty) [8]. This is Xunzi's empiricism of the natural universe derived from the transcendentalist ontological universe of the traditional Confucian view of heaven and man, and the objective laws manifested in the universe are called the Tao. Tao is permanent but everything in the world under the Tao is endlessly changing, following the dialectical rule. In *The Jewelry Purse*, the constancy of the natural way of life forms the basic logic of the story that no matter rich or poor, destiny would never favor an individual in any ways. Under this logic, the thing that has driven the story line and the fate of the characters twice was the weather, one of the objective laws of the nature.

The meeting of Xue Xiangling and Zhao Shouzhen at the 'Chunqiu kiosk' was established against the backdrop of a sudden change in the weather. The two of them, who had never met before, rested in the pavilion to shelter from the storm, and after asking for the reason why poor Miss Zhao was crying, Xue Xiangling give Zhao the jewelry purse (the Kylin bag) because of her sympathy, which became the foundation of Zhao's future fortune. Years later, the 'Flood' episode became the objective factor that caused the destruction of the Xue's family while also provided the opportunity for Xue and Zhao to switch their identities in status, after which Xue Xianglin became the servant to look after Zhao's little boy. Similarly, due to a fortuitous factor, Zhao's son mistakenly threw the ball into the red attic where the jewelry purse was kept as a precious memento. Zhao's son asked Xue Xiangling to search for his missed ball, which let Xue came into the forbidden place – the red attic, where Xue finally discovered her true relationship with Zhao. After recognized each other, Zhao regarded Xue as her distinguished guest and help Xue Xianglin eventually find her family.

Unlike some traditional operas, a sense of destiny is expressed within the whole opera. Since the 'natural Tao' did not have a particular moral standpoint, whether the storm in Chunqiu Ting, the flood in Dengzhou, or the Zhao's son's accidental act, all of these are unrelated to good and evil, but reflect

the existence of destiny in every aspect. However, the constancy of nature did not mean the absurdity of nature and the fragility of manpower. In the constant but unforgiving fate, the choices of good and evil formed different consequences. Xue Xiangling's momentary act of kindness sets the stage for her own good fortune in the future. To a certain extent, this scenario is consistent with Xunzi's idea of "changes" in the concept of the natural Tao. The idea of 'changes' in such a context not only implies changes in behaviors or mentality, but also implies 'different options'. In the face of merciless and unpredictable destiny, or in the face of a tremendous disaster, the simple and objective actions of human beings are the core power to save each other. This ideology is the core of the story that *The Jewelry Purse* as an opera intends to present to the audience, and it is also the core of traditional Chinese culture that is consistently present in Peking Opera.

3. The Modern Transformation of Dramatic Narrative Patterns

3.1. Exploring the Attic to See the Pouch and Deus Ex Machina

In ancient Greek drama, 'Deus Ex Machina' constituted a dramatic technique, which nowadays mostly refers to the force majeure added to the opera's plot through the subjective intention of the author and is used to show the change of human emotions and human tension.

After Xue Xiangling realized the death and rebirth of self-spirit, the plot fell into a predicament. However, the sudden episode in which the young master accidentally kicks a ball into the attic and orders Xue Xiangling to take it down upstairs is propelling the story to its climax. This sudden episode leads to the climax of the story, in which Xue Xiangling and Zhao Shouzheng recognize each other by the pouch enshrined on the attic. At this point, the superficial role of 'Deus Ex Machina' has been completed. However, in this part of the story, through the performance, Xue Xiangling's emotional fluctuation showed a more comprehensive characterization of the character. Besides, the display of human tension not only makes the characters more realistic, but also breaks the "fourth wall" at the theoretical level.

3.2. the Dramatic Delay

The characters in *The Jewelry Purse* are all kind-hearted, regardless of their identities or wealthiness. The rich give generously out of sympathy for the poor. The rich gave generously to the poor out of sympathy for their sufferings. The poor person remembered the kindness and favors received out of sincerity [9]. The kindness of Xue Xiangling has always lived up to the belief that it is human nature to pity the poor and help the needy, and there is no such thing as standing idly by and watching from the wall. This utopian idea also confirms the methodology of adjusting human relations in traditional Chinese society over the centuries, and it is a simple emotional externalization, as *the Poetry* said 'She throws a quince to me, I give her a green jade. Not in return, you see, but to show acquaintance made' [10].

However, the whole opera filled with changes that advance the development of the plot, including the gap between poor and rich, Xue Xiangling's fastidious character at first, Zhao's father-daughter grief and quandary, taking shelter from the rain at the Chunqiu kiosk, being distressed by the flood, becoming a servant in the mansion, searching for the ball in the attic to see the jewelry purse, and so on. Through the dramatic story line, it explored human behaviors and choices in various situations, thus reflected the social, moral and ethical issues. Through the emotional conflicts of the characters, the audience could also examine the nature of human nature and realize a higher level of dramatic significance.

4. Conclusion

Art is not a purely aesthetic creation divorced from the real world, conversely, it always embodies the resonance of the collective consciousness of a particular era. As an opera created and interpreted using traditional Peking Opera artistic expression, *The Jewelry Purse* has retained its traditional form and embodied the imprint of the times that the world imposes on its creators and interpreters. In portraying the supporting characters, Weng depicted the 'world of the time' as he saw it. For the people at that time, the pain of the change of the times included the disaster caused by the invasion of the foreign powers and the severe pain in the transition between the old and the new culture. The widening gap between the rich and the poor was a typical social phenomenon at that time. *The Jewelry Purse* has chosen to place its comedy on the transfer of wealth and poverty, and to achieve the purpose of sketching the social background around the social group portrait of the main characters, therefore, to realize the dramatic effect of reproducing the typical character in a certain environment. By portraying the strong contrast between the ideal and real society, Weng Ouhong and Cheng Yanqiu provoked people to reflect on social problems and the real situation. Through the conception and description of the ideal society, they provided the audience with a vision and hope for the ideal society and achieved a healing effect.

Cheng Yanqiu explicitly opposed the over entertainment of opera and advocated that all drama should be demanded to raise the significance of the goals of human life [11]. As well, the drama scripts which he created in conjunction with the context of the times have conveyed the author's profound contemplation of the times and moral convictions to the audience through the artistic interpretation of Cheng School. Through generations of audience's recognition of the creator's script and performer's art, *The Jewelry Purse* has been passed down to the present day by the market's choice, and finally accomplished the transcendence of time and space for works of art. This process is the best example of Peking Opera's self-renewal, self-response and transcendence. For Peking Opera, the creators and performers of a particular era are creating and expressing their work through the realization of the reality in which they live, thereby empathizing with the audience and triggering a collective resonance that transcends the limitations of time and space, this reveals its unique modernity.

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