

Study on the Ongoing Development of Contemporary Drama

—From the Perspective of Historical Evolution of the Audience-Performer Relationship

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Abstract

When discussing the challenges and obstacles faced by Chinese Opera in contemporary times, many tend to attribute them to a lack of creativity within the genre or the impact of external factors such as multimedia. However, few acknowledge the influence that the decline of performance stages—which serve as carriers for Chinese Opera—has had on its survival. When examining the historical audience-performer relationship of Chinese theaters derived from the stage, it is evident that all existing modes of audience-performer relationship can be traced back to history. Therefore, the continuous development of contemporary drama hinges on innovation of the audience-performer relationship and identification of breakthroughs for dramatic progress. The innovative audience-performer relationship in domestic and international drama cases can offer some inspiration for the ongoing development of Chinese Opera. This paper focuses on exploring the continuous development of contemporary drama through an examination of the historical evolution of the audience-performer relationship. It delves into the topic from the following perspectives: 1) analyzing the reality of Chinese traditional opera's gradual decline in contemporary times; 2) examining how the audience-performer relationship has constantly changed throughout history; and 3) providing a reference for the development of contemporary drama by analyzing innovative cases of audience-performer relationship in Chinese and foreign modern drama.

Keywords

Chinese Opera, Contemporary Drama, Theater, Audience-Performer Relationship, Ongoing Development

1. The Contemporary Decline of Chinese Opera

“In the process of urbanization, the traditional rural lifestyle gradually disintegrated. As young individuals migrated to cities and towns, they turned towards modern media such as movies, television, radio, and the Internet. Consequently, this shift has led to a decline in the audience for Chinese Opera, posing a threat to its survival.” (Bai & Guo, 2014). At the end of 2014, the State Council announced the fourth batch of national intangible cultural heritage projects, in which a total of 162 Chinese Operas have been included.

It is undeniable, however, that the Chinese Opera is declining. Chinese Opera, which is the pearl on the spire of Chinese art, is undergoing disturbing changes and challenges amid profound changes in contemporary society: the mass reduction of opera troupes, the significant loss of content creators, and the growing trend towards homogenization in opera content. These challenges can be attributed to the lack of creativity in Chinese Opera, the impact of external environments and multimedia; however, little attention is paid to the influence of the decline of stages, which serve as carriers for Chinese Opera, on its survival. The stage in the old days in China not only served as the medium for Chinese Opera, but also fostered the development of the audience-performer relationship. Furthermore, the stage bears various religious customs, opera folk customs, and even national emotions and spirits in China.

“Drama phenomenon coexists with theater, though different styles of drama exhibit varying degrees of reliance on the theater. Therefore, when studying drama, it is imperative to concurrently consider its theatrical context.” (Liao, 2012). The optimal audience-performer relationship not only serves as the key determinant for the successful presentation of opera, but also plays a crucial role in ensuring the enduring vitality of this art form. Nowadays, the theater form that fails to adapt to the evolving times lacks the interaction between performers and audience, resulting in a dearth of flexibility and allure in contemporary opera development, thereby impeding its continuous progress to some extent. The strong vitality of Chinese Opera lies in the evolving audience-performer relationship. Therefore, exploring this relationship helps identify the shortcomings of contemporary opera and provides valuable insights for its ongoing development. As Huang Lei, a famous actor and initiator of the Wuzhen Drama Festival, said, “Drama is quite a common art form that every ordinary person can participate in. Art should be integrated into the daily lives of ordinary people rather than being perceived as an unattainable lofty performance”.

2. The Developing Audience-Performer Relationship

The history of drama, as a narrative act for presenting stories, can be traced back to a time earlier than its written records. “Similar to dramas of any region and nation in the world, Chinese drama also originated from the religious imitative rituals involving songs and dances performed by primitive human beings” (Liao, 2012). These activities, rooted in the primitive human belief of sympathetic

witchcraft, initially emerged solely to fulfill religious and occult practices. In terms of primitive civilization, ancient masks can be found in the historical and cultural records of various nationalities throughout history, such as bronze masks in Liangzhu culture, from which we can explore the original drama psychology. In primitive plays, wizards, as spokesmen of gods and tribal leaders, are regarded as the earliest and greatest actors in human civilization. There is no concept of performer and audience in its performance scene, as both of them are fully engaged in the performance. In addition, primitive dramas are often perceived as enigmatic.

With the progress of civilization, the omnipotent natural gods gradually gave way to the “human” gods, including emperors and heroes who were endowed with the aura of gods. The concept of warding off evil spirits in the worship of man and beast gradually faded, and the awesome ferocious beasts were replaced by the auspicious beast that brought joy and good fortune to people. And auspicious beasts were no longer performed by wizards, resulting in a transformation of the nature of drama into a popular square game (Zhou, Chai, & Che, 2009). Even today, traditional animal-themed dramas such as lion dance and dragon dance are still active in temple fairs each year, and even in some large-scale programs in China. These performances can quickly capture the audience’s attention and are very popular among people.

In the agricultural era, human beings migrated from forest valleys and established settlements in plains and hills that were suitable for cultivation. Therefore, the ritualistic music and dance ceremonies dedicated to farming deities, such as “Ge Tianshi’s Music,” began to be held in the cultivated fields. Even the large-scale narrative music and dance Jiushao, organized by the first monarch of the Xia Dynasty, was not held in the palace but rather in an open field, as recorded in the ancient texts which said “performing Jiushao on the plain.” The open field serves as both the ritual space and the performance venue for the original drama, a performance mode that still exists today. After the state implementation of intangible cultural heritage protection in contemporary times, these performance modes have emerged in the forms of “sacrificial performances” in cultural squares or tourist attractions to captivate public attention.

“When the utilitarian purpose of the mimicry performance of primitive drama changed from religion to art, and from praying to God to entertaining people, it becomes imperative to delve into the audience, the object of drama” (Liao, 2012). Back then, the connotation and extension of “audience” were different. First, the “audience” were the official and gentry class rather than the ordinary audience as today. Second, since the drama catered to the upper class, the audience-performer relationship back then differed from contemporary times. The primary objective of drama performances was to provide entertainment for officials and gentry, with utmost priority given to satisfying the audience’s requirements. These performances resemble the presentations found in contemporary high-level private clubs, wherein they are tailored to specific venues that cater to the preferences of particular individuals. This customized audience-performer

relationship is also a contributing factor to the enduring success of such plays.

In the Zhou and Qin Dynasties, Yanyue (music for the formal feast) and Sanyue (acrobatics and drama) emerged. During the Sui and Tang Dynasties, there were court banquets with large scale, diverse musical modes and musical instruments, and numerous music and dance programs. During that period, the audience sat around the performance area to enjoy delicious food while being entertained by singing and dancing acts. These performances served as a delightful accompaniment to banquets, fostering an atmosphere of enjoyment for both performers and audience (Zhou, Chai, & Che, 2009). This audience-performer relationship fully retains the “freedom” of the viewer and the performer, distinguishing it from formal theaters where viewers observe from a distance. Nowadays, such scenarios can be observed when hosting foreign guests, or in celebrations such as wedding ceremonies and year-end parties of companies.

The Stone Relief of Hundred Plays in the Han Dynasty depicts square-style performances. There are 28 actors in the Stone Reliefs of Hundred Plays in the Han Dynasty. Their performances include jumping pills and swords, throwing down, pole-climbing, upside down acrobatics, belly spinning, etc. Among them, there is a band of 22 people. “The musical instruments include bell, rock, drum, pellet drum, flute, clarinet, Sheng (free reed wind instrument), harp and Xun (globular vessel flute)” (Liao, 2012). It can be seen from “Stone Reliefs of Hundred Plays in the Han Dynasty” that the way of appreciating square performances from above appeared in the Han Dynasty.

During the reign of Emperor Xuanzong of Tang, there were squares in the expanded Building of Diligent Administration and the Hua’e Building in Chang’an city. Additionally, a long corridor was constructed on the wall of the Building of Diligent Administration, taking on the shape resembling the Chinese character “day”. There was an observation area surrounding the Building of Diligent Administration and the Hua’e Building, while the promenade square beneath the pavilion served as a grand “stage” for hosting large-scale banquets or music and dance performances. The opening and closing ceremonies of the Olympic Games nowadays demonstrate the typical square-style audience-performer relationship, which can also be seen in military parade.

As traditional drama evolved, transitioning from a religious ritual to a performance for the entertainment of people, it embraced music and dance as its new foundation. Gradually breaking free from the confines of religion, traditional drama emerged as an independent art form. The performance skills of drama reached a new level of maturity, with an increasingly diverse range of performance techniques and deeper cultural and artistic significance. This has led to the development of innovative time and space expression techniques, such as freehand brushwork, as well as a series of virtual and stylized artistic languages. Additionally, the venue for drama is becoming more professionalized (Liao, 2012).

During the Song and Yuan Dynasties, the venue for drama performance offi-

cially appeared, that is, the stage in the temple. “The stage within the temple and its surrounding viewing environment constitute a comprehensive performance setting, resulting from the shared architectural structure of the stage and the corridor building in the temple.” (Liao, 2012). The evolution of this temple stage can be traced back to the Tang Dynasty, but it truly flourished during the Song Dynasty. Performing drama on the stage in the temple is the most important form of folk theater in China, serving not only as a means of artistic expression but also as a tool for instilling fear and reverence in devotees who come to offer incense and worship Buddha within its enclosed space, ultimately achieving the goal of propagating Buddhism. What’s more, the opera performed in the temple can also reconcile and ease the relationship between man and God.

However, the stage in the temple is not a specialized venue for theater performance after all. In the Song Dynasty, the appearance of Goulan (winding railings) indicates the emergence of real theater. The thriving urban commercial economy and the emergence of a substantial number of itinerant merchants during the Song Dynasty propelled the gradual advancement and expansion of market entertainment. It is within this flourishing commercial backdrop that Goulan, a professional theater, emerged in the urban commercial entertainment area. Based on the distinctive features of temple theater, Goulan also took into full consideration the arrangement of the audience area to provide a comfortable viewing experience for the audience. In the interior space of Goulan, the stage was elevated at a central position above ground level and was surrounded by concentric tiers of audience seating. The closed shape of Goulan ensured its immunity to climate and seasonal influences, allowing for performances at any given time. In addition, the commercial performance mode of Goulan enhanced the drama’s reach among the masses, and the audience who bought tickets were allowed to enter the Goulan to watch the performance. Nevertheless, the architecture of Goulan theater was relatively rudimentary, with its construction materials mostly wood and mats, which were not strong enough and restricted the further development of the theater. In addition, Goulan’s performance relied heavily on the commercial prosperity of the city. When the urban economy gradually depressed after the Ming Dynasty, Goulan also experienced a decline. The performance forms of modern circus and Goulan share similarities as they both are temporary. Nowadays, the circus has gradually shifted from temporary performances to fixed theaters for various reasons.

Zaju (mixed drama) in the Song Dynasty is a secular funny performance, including folk art rap, like clowns in circus performances and humorous skits in entertainment evening galas. The same performance was also called “Heshile” in the Northern Song Dynasty, and “Heshi” refers to the commercial city along the south river of Bianliang, the capital of the Northern Song Dynasty (Zhou, Chai, & Che, 2009). The painting *Along the River during the Qingming Festival* created by Zhang Zeduan during the Northern Song Dynasty exemplifies this particular audience-performer style prevalent in the Song Dynasty. By the end of the Qing Dynasty, such performances still existed. Even in today’s countryside,

this type of performance can still be found.

During the Song and Jin Dynasties, itinerant performers were in a state of semi-agriculture and semi-art. As urban entertainment demand and spending capacity grew, some of these performers opted to settle in cities and pursue professional artistic careers. Usually, they could perform everywhere, and charged the audience for watching the performance. Nowadays, there are also amateur artists who engage in street performances during the slack season of farming, or street performers who have been stationed in underground passages for a long time, such as Xidan Girl.

With the advancement of stage entertainment, during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, temple stages in the Central Plains were frequently constructed as elevated platforms, encompassed by the viewers. These elevated platforms served as exclusive venues for a specialized performance troupe that regularly showcased their talents. In addition to the auditorium designed for general viewers, there were also designated temporary structures known as “watching sheds” specifically arranged for officials, aristocrats, and women. This traditional form of performance persisted, with its venue gradually transforming into an ancestral temple over time.

The Tea Garden Hall emerged during the Qing Dynasty as a result of the functional evolution of ancestral halls and temples. The previous semi-open-air performance form gradually transformed into a fully enclosed space (Liao, 2012). In Beijing, there were many tea garden halls, which were often called Beijing-style tea houses. On the first floor, there were permanent scattered seats, while on the second floor, there were private rooms served with melons, fruits and tea. Back then, it was the golden age of opera. People knew opera regardless of their social standing, and they were willing to spend money to enjoy opera. Everyone could hum a song. Nowadays, with the waning popularity of opera, there has been a noticeable decline in opera performances across tea halls in Beijing, Chengdu, Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces. Instead, these venues are increasingly hosting alternative forms of entertainment such as storytelling.

With the opening of China’s coastal ports, a large number of missionaries and expatriates from the West poured into China, and most of them chose Shanghai for settlement. At the beginning of the 20th century, Shanghai’s population had surpassed one million, predominantly comprising middle and lower class inhabitants. The narrow Beijing-style tea garden could only accommodate hundreds of people, and the audience were mostly businessmen and members of gentry. This particular mode of consumption, catering to the affluent for entertainment purposes, failed to address the escalating spiritual consumption demands of ordinary citizens. In order to meet the potential leisure and entertainment needs of the general public, “the new stage (1908) and several other new stages have officially propelled the traditional drama performance market into the realm of mass entertainment lifestyle.” (Chen, 2014).

When examining the historical audience-performer relationship of Chinese

theaters, it is evident that all existing modes of audience-performer relationship can be traced back to history. The challenge encountered by modern drama lies in the transformation of the audience's captivation with opera into a contemporary niche pursuit. The development of contemporary drama is hindered by its adherence to a rigid form and the limited interaction between audience and performers. Therefore, the continuous development of contemporary drama hinges on innovation of the audience-performer relationship and identification of breakthroughs for dramatic progress. In the following sections, we will discuss its continuous development from several typical cases at home and abroad.

3. The Innovative Case Analysis of the Audience-Performer Relationship of Modern Drama at Home and Abroad

“Drama is a comprehensive art in which actors and audiences are present at the same time” (Han, 2008). A famous Korean director once pointed out that “drama is an art form that resonates with the audience” (Tian, 2010). That said, the success of a drama should primarily consider the spatial dynamics between the audience and performers, identifying the most suitable approach to both viewing and performing the drama. In addition, the drama should foster a closer connection between the audience and performers, thereby naturally evoking an authentic response from the drama.

In Longzhong, Hubei Province, there is a Caolu Theater built amidst breathtaking natural landscapes. The theater is embraced by lush mountains and bordered by two serene lakes to its west and south. The theater features a centrally positioned stage, measuring 80 meters in diameter and adorned with a Taiji diagram. Surrounding the stage in a tiered configuration are 1500 auditoriums spread across four floors, seamlessly integrating the stage and seating areas into a harmonious ensemble. Longzhong, known as Zhuge Liang's secluded retreat, has long been revered as a sacred haven for hermits. The innovation of the audience-performer relationship in Caolu Theater, which is situated far from the bustling crowds, lies in its seamless integration of humanities, nature, and performance. This type of theater revolutionizes the audience-performer relationship by emphasizing innovations based on traditional culture.

“The theater is the space where performers and the audience coexist, created in an instant moment.” (Liu, 1996). The Icelandic troupe has creatively produced a space stage, which can be easily transported to any venue, eliminating spatial limitations. In addition, this stage is no longer a traditional framed stage, but an installed space, where visitors can rest inside. When visitors walk into this plot space, they become performers and participate in a “performance”. When the visitor rests on the stool in the space, he regains the identity of the audience. This kind of space completely breaks the “fourth wall” and erases the demarcation between performers and audience (Brook, 1998).

Immersive Theatre is the latest popular avant-garde drama on the international drama stage, which blends elements of poverty drama and environmental

drama. “We can choose any space and call it an empty stage. A drama is created when a person walks through this space under the gaze of others.” (Shen, 2014). Punchdrunk, the founder of Immersive Theatre, once performed a special drama. He found a McKittrick Hotel abandoned by World War II in Chelsea, Manhattan, New York, and performed the drama *Sleep No More* here. In the drama, the audience is no longer just sitting in their seats, but walking calmly inside and outside the drama. They enter any room at will to watch the performance without any restrictions. The audience can even interact with the actors and participate in the performance at any time at their own discretion. This fresh performance form brings creative inspiration to drama. Given the diverse perspectives of individual viewers, each audience holds a unique interpretation of the drama, resulting in distinct emotional experiences. To fully grasp the intricacies and narrative structure of the entire story, one viewing experience falls short in providing comprehensive understanding. This drama premiered in 2003 and is still performing today. The evidence has demonstrated the enduring viability of the innovative audience-performer relationship, which serves as a means to bring the audience closer to the drama.

In recent years, the performance form of “Art Museum Drama” is also a very dynamic exploration. The audience leisurely meanders through the art museum to indulge in dramatic performances, thereby necessitating a broader concept of stage design that caters to multifaceted viewing. This entails moving away from the traditional framed stage, which only presents one side to the audience. The *Triumphant Hymn of Fernando Pessoa*, performed by the French Golden Troupe, took place at the Times Art Museum, seamlessly integrating elements of drama performance, modern dance, performance art, and installation art. In the morning, three artists involved in the theatrical production entered the venue, allowing the audience to witness various dramatic preparations such as artist rehearsals and equipment adjustments. In the evening, the audience had the opportunity to indulge in a captivating performance of the entire play. This unique audience-performer relationship of *Triumphant Hymn of Fernando Pessoa* focuses on the integration of performance and exhibition.

With different audiences, the forms and audience-performer relationships have also changed. The flourishing and enduring development of such dramas and performance forms relies on the establishment of a tacit understanding among actors, audience, and performance venues. That said, “drama is a creative group activity, wherein actors and audience serve as its fundamental constituents” (Zhou, 2014). If contemporary Chinese drama aims to achieve significant advancements and revive the “golden age”, it must incorporate itself into the spiritual culture of ordinary individuals, rather than being perceived as an unattainable lofty performance. Chinese contemporary drama, represented by opera, can explore a breakthrough in the audience-performer relationship while preserving the traditional performance mode. This entails engaging with the audience, understanding their preferences, and fostering a sense of involvement and novelty. By establishing a strong connection between performers and spec-

tators, Chinese Opera can be revitalized and become more captivating.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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