

**The University of Nottingham,
Ningbo**

***Chinese and Western
Theatre Traditions:
A Comparative
Perspective***
Colin Mackerras

Aims and Introduction

- **Aim to draw some similarities and differences between Western and Chinese theatre traditions**
- **Not aim to cast judgments or say one is better than the other**
- **Structure is topical, so period not main focus**
 - **However, most examples from 15th to 19th centuries**
 - **Late imperial period (Ming and Qing) in China**
 - **Renaissance to high imperialism (romanticism)**

Definitions: What Precisely Am I Talking About

- **Focus on drama defined as a form of theatre in which:**
 - **Actors perform and impersonate individual characters;**
 - **There is a story; and**
 - **There are interrelationships among the characters in the plot, even if they don't appear on stage**
- Not much on dance, song, clowning, acrobatics (unless within a drama or opera)**

Different Types of Traditions

- *Plays and many genres*
- *Opera, European form beginning end 16th century, music being essential*
- *Xiqu and “opera”*
 - *Xiqu is sung, but does that make it opera?*
 - *The importance of Kunqu (the drama of the literati)*
 - *The rise of the popular theatre*
 - *Jingju (Peking Opera?)*

The Purpose of Drama

- **A range of ideas found *why* one should perform a drama**
 - **Confucian notion: promote social harmony, good relationships, performance accompanies ritual**
 - **Worship God (Christian idea)**
 - **Purify the soul**
 - **Promote a particular political, cultural or ethical view**
 - **Promote patriotism**
 - **“To hold, as ‘twere, the mirror up to nature”
(*Hamlet*)**
- **Entertainment**

Authorship and Composition

- *Kunqu* practice (joined-song structure *lianquti*) of selecting the tune first (*qupai*) and then writing words for it
- Beat-tune structure (found in *jingju*) and clapper opera emphasizes the rhythm and a limited number of tunes
- Implication: the composer is not known
- Dramatist is known for *Kunqu* and many *zaju* but not for popular regional dramas; text adjusted by the director

The Globe Theatre, London, 2006



Drama and Literature

- **Authors, composers in the West**
 - Strong development and change over the centuries under discussion
- **Drama as a branch of literature**
 - Note regional popular Chinese *xiqu* take their plots from novels or earlier written dramas, but are not themselves regarded as literature, not even usually written down
 - Contrast and comparison with the West
- **Drama as a performed or read experience**
 - Always intended as performance
 - But some advantages in reading without performance

The Theatre and Stage

- **Theatre as an outdoor entertainment**
- **Temporary or permanent**
- **Temple or outside churches**
 - **Actually *within* the temple**
- **The proscenium stage and its features**
 - **Audience sits facing the stage, and separated from it, different from the “thrust stage” with audience sitting three sides, possibility of curtain at the front (not at the back as in China)**
 - **Originated in Europe, suitable for very large theatres**
 - **The Globe did (does) not use proscenium stage**
- **The influence of the proscenium stage on world theatre, including that of China**
- **Décor**



Hou Fangyu and Li Xiangjun in *Taohua shan*



Conventions

- **All theatres have their conventions**
- **Chinese theatre very tied to conventions: costumes, gestures, mannerisms**
- **Did Chinese theatre develop less fundamentally over the 16th to 19th centuries than did European?**
- **If it failed to develop as rapidly, was this partly because of the strength of conventions?**

Audiences

- **Popular theatre**
 - Gather for markets, religious ceremonies, festivals
- **Aristocratic/literati theatre**
 - Private houses could use an open space for performance on a red carpet, perform between rows of diners
- **Court theatres**
- **Women in the audience, all-female audiences?**
- **Children in the audience?**
 - Culture especially aimed at children

Part of the audience, Wutai shan



Scene, Temple Stage, Wutai shan



Music, Singing, Speaking

- ***Purely spoken tradition not found in Chinese theatre until the twentieth century***
- ***No specific composers of Chinese xiqu until quite recently***
- ***Have regional musical styles, rather than products of particular composers***
- ***The centrality of European musical development in opera***
 - ***Relate to equal tempered scale***

Plot

- Both give strong role to emotion
- Episodic versus climactic
 - Affects length, can have either one scene (very short) or numerous scenes, a whole drama lasting several days
- Theory of plot development in the West, follows especially Aristotle: e.g. exposition, complication, climax, denouement, catastrophe etc. Must be tension, conflict
- Chinese drama subdivides into military and civilian
 - *Zaju* has similar tension, but in general less central to Chinese theatre
- Setting in one's own culture?
- History as a source
- The role of magic

Tragedy

- **Ancient Greek (Aristotelean) theory of *catharsis* or purging**
 - Lacking in the Chinese tradition,
 - Chinese generally prefer happy ending
 - A few dramas have sad ending, e.g. *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai (The Butterfly Lovers)*
- **Much argument in the European tradition on why somebody else's suffering evokes such a response**
- **Also tendency to categorize and evaluate cultures according to their production of tragedy**
- **Wang Guowei (1877-1927) theorized that the lack of Western-style tragedy in Chinese drama, and the preference for happy endings, was due to the people's worldly and optimistic nature**
 - Also claimed there were a few tragedies in Chinese literature, especially from *zaju*.

Comedy

- **Features of comedy:**
 - Appeals to human wish to laugh
 - Has a happy ending
 - Often laughs at the silly features of people and societies in general
- **Some have regarded comedy as inferior to tragedy, but there is another point of view**
- **All great dramatic traditions have comedy**
 - Note the prevalence of comedy in small-scale popular regional theatre

Patterns of Characterization

- **Role types in Chinese drama connected with characterization: e.g. *laosheng*, *qingyi*, *dan*, etc.**
- **Role types in Western opera and their reflection in character**
- **Western characters often reflect theories of tension**
- **Female characters**
 - **Military female heroes in Chinese theatre: e.g. Mu Guiying, Hua Mulan**
 - **Some major strong female characters in Western theatre: e.g. Portia, Lady Macbeth**

Mutual Influences

- **Comparatively little mutual influence until the 20th century**
 - Spoken play (1907) derived from the West through Japan
- **J.B. du Halde's (1674-1743) *Histoire générale de la China* 1736 (*The General History of China* 1741) summarizes *Zhaoshi guer* (*Orphan of Zhao*), inspired Voltaire's (1694-1778) *L'orphélin de la Chine*.**
 - Context of Western enthusiasm for China
- **Carlo Gozzi's *Turandot*, 1762 example of a play set in China, and C.W. Gluck's (1714-87) little-known opera *Le Cinese* (*Chinese Women*).**

Actors and Society

- **Theatre as a social activity in China and Europe**
- **The status of actors**
 - **Traditionally low, both in Europe and China, on the margins of law, slaves, in China could not sit exams**
 - **Why so low? Often no fixed address, life of make-believe, associated with prostitution and low morals**
 - **Gender and the acting profession, boys playing the roles of women, women playing the roles of men**
 - **The emergence of the “star”**

Conclusion

- Differences outweigh similarities or *vice versa*
- Can or should we draw any general evaluation, and what criteria do we use? Or rather appreciate each in its own terms
- What we can say is that Western patterns have become more generally accepted and influential internationally
 - Why? Possible reasons
- Extent of change?
 - How important is this?
- What about other conventional ideas such as the stifling effect of official examinations in China by comparison with the West, with its emphasis on rote learning as opposed to analysis and inventiveness?
- Survivability in the modern world?