

“A Word” and “Not Veiled” —A Brief Exploration of Cultural Symbols in Contemporary Drama Stage Practice

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Abstract: *So far, the influence of Western drama styles on Chinese drama practice has been significant. Contemporary Chinese stage plays, however, have a few novelties as compared to earlier drama. As practitioners explore the national character of Chinese drama, the presentation of contemporary drama stages tends towards a freer rhythm, without the constraint of strict rules. On the one hand, "imagination" and "blank space" inject exquisitely cultural appeal into Chinese drama practice, much like the emotional expression and contemplation discussed by Guowei Wang in "Poetic Remarks In The Human World" using the concept of "A Word". On the other hand, "original culture culture" and "artistic spirit" bring deep and enigmatic aspects to Chinese drama stages, similar to the emotional resonance and transmission explored in "Poetic Remarks In The Human World" with reference to the idea of "Not Veiled." Embracing elements such as "imagination" and "blank space" intricately weaves cultural influences into the practice. The integration of "A Word" and "Not Veiled" has nurtured the independent artistic character and cultural vitality of contemporary Chinese theatrical practices.*

Keywords: *National characteristics; Chinese original culture; Stage symbols; Cross-cultural contexts*

1. Introduction

The contemporary cross-cultural exchange trend in the field of Chinese drama, has brought new opportunities and chances. However, in the process of "drama going global", there are still some deficiencies in the practice of grasping national elements on the drama stage. Many scholarly studies have explored Guowei Wang's creative ideas and the nationalization of theater. Shijiao Li's "The Distinction between 'Innate Talent' and 'Acquired Quality' in Poetic Remarks in the Human World" and Limei Xing's "On the Realm Theory of Wang Guowei's Human Worlds and Language" have generated a wealth of research currently available for the "aesthetic conception" analysis. Yuting Zhang's paper "On the Vitality of nationalization of Modern Drama Art" provides an examination of the nationalization of modern drama through an emphasis on the stage performance. In addition, some articles—like Can Chi's "Qinxin Tian Direcys Art Theory"—focus on the national style of a contemporary drama director.^[1]

In contrast to the previous research, the primary objective of this study is to elucidate how the integration of "Chinese original culture" into the contemporary drama stage can be explained by Guowei Wang's "A Word" and "Not Veiled" as proposed in "Poetic Remarks In The Human World." It highlights how crucially "A Word" and "Not Veiled" interact to support the autonomous creative identity and cultural vitality of modern Chinese theater. The way theater stages are presented in cross-cultural communication contexts can benefit from some of the inspiration this study offers.

To reveal how Guowei Wang's theory and Chinese original culture are integrated into stage practice, this study is based on the experiential practice of reading, listening, thinking, and appreciating, covering methods such as literature data, style analysis, visual image research, and semiotic analysis. "Discuss 'A Word'," "Discuss 'Not Veiled'," and "Discuss the Presentation of 'Artistic Quality' on the Contemporary Drama Stage" make up the three primary sections of this article. It explores how to help the audience comprehend the emotional expression on stage while maintaining a connection to the original culture through an analysis of the performance style elements and stage expressions of a few contemporary drama works.^[2]

This exploration goes beyond the mere level of dramatic performance, triggering broad thinking: works in the era of cross-cultural communication need to establish deeper connections with national

heritage, spiritual connotations, and eternal human experiences, and still possess contemporary aesthetic characteristics and artistic vitality in different language media.

2. Discuss "A Word"

In the sixth chapter of "Poetic Remarks In The Human World", Guowei Wang uses "Word" to talk about the emotional expression of poetry: "Therefore, poetry that can describe true scenes and true emotions may be considered to have a world; otherwise it may be considered not to have a world."

The concept of "A Word" distinguishes and summarizes the "physical realm" and "mental realm" in a profound manner. Especially well-known is the "a word without a self", which integrates rich Taoist connotations. The idea of "non-self" can be traced back to Chapter 41 of Laozi's "Daodejing" where the "Dao" is "hidden" rather than "zero", implying a metaphysical aspect of "observing things with things". Beyond poetry and literature, in actuality, each artistic expression has the emotional tones of the artist, whether deliberately revealed or subtly concealed. This additionally applies to Chinese play staging, where the fusion of emotion and scene is vital. The effect of "less is more" on stage can truly resonate when emotions and scenes flow together naturally, allowing the audience's imagination to flourish.

The concept of "A Word" constructs an artistic expression of blended scenarios. Similar to Chinese art, the "aesthetic context" is an essential tool for expressing ideas, whether they be strong lines and splattering ink to portray enthusiasm or delicate contours and careful brushwork. In the realm of drama, the tendency is towards a "form of beauty". For example, the play "Cai Wenji" is brimming with poetic sentiments, and it is believed that the performance's blank spaces, fueled by the power of imagination, inject a vibrant life into the play. This is inseparable from director Juyin Jiao's deep and consistent pursuit of refining and pondering over traditional opera elements and establishing a national drama school. Specifically presented in two aspects of stage practice, it is concretely presented in two aspects of stage practice. The first is to develop performers' acting skills; the second is to aim for realistic and lifelike stage effects. In every aspect of stage expression, there is an overflow of the creator's passion. The creative elements seen in the play "Cai Wenji" represent a phase of director Juyin Jiao's "transforming Chinese operatic characteristics" that is progressively developed and refined. Chinese operatic programming is tangible, thus the movements possess sufficient expressiveness; additionally, because the audience's imagination is intangible, it can be paired with personal recollections to fill in all the blanks left on stage.

Continuing from the previous insights, meticulous attention to detail is evident in every aspect of stage expression. The play "Cai Wenji" stands as a testament to his unwavering commitment to refining and pondering over traditional opera elements while infusing them with a subtle yet vibrant life. The key to Juyin Jiao's grasp of the artistic characteristics of "Cai Wenji" is based on the audience's rich imagination, combined with the straightforward, profound, and concise expression of poetic sentiment through artistic means. This helps to enhance the actors' skills while also aiming for an audience-engaging, realistic stage effect. Every action directed by Juyin Jiao is deliberately universal, and he skillfully fuses dramatic storytelling with creative vision to leave everyone who watches his work with a lasting impression.

Regarding the stage setting, director Juyin Jiao seeks a similar effect of virtuality and reality on the stage. Jia Ah said in "Realism and Taste": "But judging from its characteristics, it is inspiring. This kind of scenery is very clean and rich." However, some actors like to have elaborate stage settings to complement themselves, resulting in a distraction from the main focus - the person rather than the environment.^[1]

In the "Poetic Remarks In The Human World" second chapter, it is pointed out that it is related to "ideals" and "realism". Guowei Wang said: "There are poets who create worlds and some who describe worlds. Here lies the distinction between idealism and realism. However, the two are rather difficult to separate because the worlds created by a great poet always conform to Nature, and those described by him always come close to the ideal." It is evident that the description and creation go well together. The more "Not Veiled" the words are, the deeper the fusion between things and myself, and the more intense the blending of emotions and scenes. The same is true for the stage presentation of dramas: the organic progression of the story tends towards objectivity, which is in line with nature; the bursting emotions of the characters are rich with complex emotions that only intensify.

This is reflected in the director Juyin Jiao's stage production of "Cai Wenji," where the steady and objective historical clues are matched with the stage setting that combines reality and fiction, and the

poetic emotions of the characters are full. The heavy ancient music of "Hu Jia's Eighteen Beats" fully renders the opening of the ink painting, serene, thick, and romantic. A spear, several flags, one against ten, a few representing many, grasping the infinite from the limited. The use of non-reflective black curtains creates a unique appeal, breaking the limitations of the stage framework, and matching the heavy cloaks, stage curtains, and the actors' materials and colors to form a "visible" and "real" response. On the stage in the second act, the extras form a powerful formation. Using people to create the set, is just like how Chinese opera endows the environment with life through people. The scenery moves with the people, changing scenery as they move.^[3]

The drama "Cai Wenji" is not a flight of fancy, but an imagination that starts with a single thought and affects the whole body, and is based on generality. To some extent, the audience's imagination is often more real and richer than the physical props on stage. Everything is built on the premise that the audience is willing to believe. This kind of dramatic practice promotes audience participation, inspires audience imagination, and at the same time, inspires the relationship between real life and artistic truth.

In the fifty-sixth chapter of "Poetic Remarks In The Human World," it is written: "The writings of the great masters, in expressing human feelings, must be able to suffuse people's hearts. In describing scenes, they must be able to open people's ears and eyes. Their words come out naturally, without affectation and artificiality. This is due to the fact that what they have observed is true and that what they have known is profound. It holds true in both poetry and ci. Taking this standard to measure writers of the ancient times and present day, one will not commit gross errors." It is clear from this that Guowei Wang's criticism of words is not limited to the content's "authenticity", but also calls for art to be naturally unpretentious when conveying sentiments.^[5] The conveyance of sentiments is equally important on the theatrical stage, and the key to conveying sentiments lies in being "Not Veiled". Just as Guowei Wang said in the fortieth chapter of "Poetic Remarks In The Human World": "Lies in the fact that they are not veiled." This implies that the reader shouldn't feel puzzled or uneasy after reading the author's account.

3. Discuss "Not Veiled"

The investigation of "expressing emotions" in theater by modern directors is especially noteworthy, they have gradually moved away from consciously pursuing or copying the dramatic performance form, not only by incorporating elements of traditional Chinese opera, but also by discontinuing their simple leaning toward Western expressionism and other contemporary theatrical concepts and instead focusing on the the deep-seated ideological and aesthetic explorations of the Chinese nation, employing "stage symbols" of the national culture to create the "seeds of images" on the contemporary stage. When the story content and emotional appeal presented on the stage condense into "seeds of images," it is more conducive to the formation of a "Not Veiled" state. In actuality, in the post-new era, Chinese drama gradually integrated "realistic traditions" into "expressive content," and increasingly emphasized the grasp of stage form and dramatic symbols.^[4]

Director Xiaozhong Xu's "The Story of Sangshuping Village" has been praised as "a 'golden bridge' that connects realism to expressionism." The custom of "slaughtering cattle for a funeral" is a grand activity in the mourning ceremony of the Shui ethnic group, serving the purpose of entertaining the gods and seeking blessings. The Miao ethnic group in China also has the custom of "sacrificing cattle to ancestors." There are many explanations about the origin of this sacrificial method, and the development from the burial of war horses and warriors alongside "sacrificing ancestors" to the present custom of slaughtering cattle is the most similar. In "Ying Dong the Filial," Ying Dong sees a mother sheep struggling to give birth, understanding the hardships of a mother giving birth to a baby, and decides to use the slaughter of cattle to replace, thus creating the custom of "sacrificing cattle to ancestors" for the descendants of the Yue people.

In traditional beliefs and important rituals, the cow symbolizes and signifies offspring and descendants. The theatrical rendition of "The Story of Sangshuping Village" also uses the cow as a motif. The imagery of the cow is portrayed on stage through actors wearing cow costumes. The villagers in the play take good care of the elderly cow known as "Huozi," paying it love and respect by making sure it never goes without food. The play utilizes the imagery of "hunting" three times as a core scenario throughout the entire production, especially the third time when the entire village hunts the old yellow cow "Huozi." The traditional cultural understanding of the rites and ceremonies involved with "killing the cow" is challenged by the symbolic meaning of the act, carrying the inner need for human "blessing." In this play, the same action of "killing the cow" ultimately reflects the villagers' ignorant and numb mindset based on the traditional understanding of cultural customs.

Zhongshu Qian summarized in the article "Not Separated" that "the author's description can coincide with our own personal observation, experience, and imagination, with the same clarity or vividness, as if we have experienced it ourselves, this is 'not separated.'" The portrayal on the stage of the drama is the same. The emotional expression behind the stage requires a presentation that is "not separated." The cultural symbols and spiritual connotations grown in the national soil are an important means to achieve "Not Veiled."

In the exploration of Chinese drama stages, in addition to the use of "symbols" nourished by traditional Chinese spirit on the stage, contemporary director Qinxin Tian has endowed the drama stage with aesthetic characteristics nourished by Chinese-style aesthetics, and under the influence of "Zen" thinking, introduced the "Zen Drama Trilogy," "Green Snake," "Beijing Fayuan Temple," and "Listening to Hong Yi." Truly integrating Chinese aesthetics and personalized style into the theater.

4. Discuss "Artistic Quality" is presented on the contemporary drama stage

Guowei Wang's evaluation of the term "regarding 'A Word' as the highest" suggests that, to some extent, "A Word" encompasses "artistic conception." Therefore, summarizing "A Word" solely as an "artistic conception" runs the risk of oversimplification. Just as Yong Chen pointed out in his article "A Brief Discussion on the Theory of Realm," the "theory of realm," apart from shaping artistic images and expressing emotions, involves a unique charm that operates independently from the situation. The key to outstanding artistic works being able to transcend time, space, and different personal groups lies in this aspect.

On the contemporary stage, Qinxin Tian's Zen drama possesses a unique independent temperament. In the "Encyclopedia of Buddhism" compiled by Fubao Ding, "Zen" is explained as a brief of "Dhyana," which is derived from India, translated as "abandoning evil, gathering merits in the forest, and contemplation and practice." The portrayal of "Zen" on the contemporary Chinese dramatic stage, in my opinion, reflects the religious philosophy of the Chinese Buddhist "Zen Sect" and the life philosophy of traditional literati in China. The play "The Beijing Fayuan Temple" combines the temple and the court on the stage, depicting historical and political struggles, while the play "Qingping Tune" runs throughout the entire drama, intentionally dispelling the solemn atmosphere of the theater's stories. The physical barrier between the audience from the stage narrative is broken at the start of the play when a number of Zen masters make their way from the audience seats to the stage while reciting.

Director Qinxin Tian has consistently adhered to an approach that avoids pandering to the public, displaying unique craftsmanship. Upholding an understanding of Chinese classical aesthetics, in the play "Ming Dynasty," Qinxin Tian applies Chinese painting and landscape aesthetics to the dramatic stage. Inspired by the three-dimensional installation art of the modern artist Xiaowan Xia, Director Qinxin Tian, with the support of lighting technology, presents "ink landscape paintings" as installation art on the stage. The integration of various emperors' performance arts with landscapes creates a fusion of roles and landscapes, actors, and stage art, expressing the Chinese philosophical idea that "no one can be an emperor for all eternity, but the country is always there" in an unconventional stage form. In a sense, this represents an artistic work with unique personal insights and temperament, encapsulating the charm that "A Word" contains and is understood but difficult to articulate. In summary, the imaginative power based on "A Word" is not fanciful but rather comprehensive and based on imagination, and in a way, the creative potential derived from "A Word" is broad.

The audience's imagination often appears to be more realistic and richer than the actual objects on stage. Everything is based on the audience's willingness to believe, and this kind of theatrical practice simultaneously involves the audience, engaging them in artistic creation, ultimately achieving an "unrestricted" transmission of artistic works and inspiring the audience's imagination, as well as the relationship between real life and artistic reality. Looking at the whole, "Poetic Remarks In The Human World" combines Western scholarship with Chinese aesthetics, particularly in the current cross-cultural setting, and holds monumental significance. While analyzing the visual imagery of Chinese poetry using aesthetic theories from other nations, it has inspirational value for creating Chinese art in a cross-cultural setting since it explores and focuses on the intrinsic driving force with national characteristics.

The differences in artistic theory and forms between the East and West are irrelevant in terms of superiority or inferiority. A hundred years ago, predecessors of Chinese drama like Juyin Jiao hoped to truly establish the country's own dramatic art through "nationalizing drama", and a century later, we can export outstanding domestic drama works. Especially in today's era of global cultural development and prosperity, the mutual integration, exchange, and mutual learning of dramatic arts has become an

irreversible trend. She Lao's play "The Teahouse", director Ming Ren's "Our Jing Ke", and the Ying Huang team's "Cooking A Dream" ... These unique and full of Eastern flavor dramas that have grown on foreign stages offer a significant new direction for cross-cultural drama: transforming cultural symbols with a national backbone into rich, vibrant, and flexible forms, presented in practical theatrical practice.



Figure 1: Performance of "Cooking A Dream" at Gallus Theater in Frankfurt

Every performance of the play "Cooking A Dream" is filled with the aroma of Chinese red bean rice in theaters across the country. At the beginning of each performance, the audience will sieve and steam the rice. As the performance progresses, the aroma of rice permeates the theater, immersing the audience in a sensory experience that engages their visual, auditory, and olfactory senses, allowing them to taste the cultural flavor of Chinese drama through every sensory aspect. In addition to aligning with the story's theme, this kind of attempt creates a unique theatrical blend that combines the core of Tang Dynasty legends with Chinese traditional diet culture. This blend spreads the lingering scent of Chinese dramatic stories to every seat in the audience, fostering a mutually beneficial interaction between the stage and the audience and presenting a smooth and comprehensive cultural feast of Chinese drama in foreign theaters.

For example, in the performance of "Cooking A Dream" in Frankfurt, (Figure1:Performance of "Cooking A Dream" at Gallus Theater in Frankfurt) the traditional operatic features such as costumes, facial makeup, and familiar body language of foreign audiences are used to construct space-time, enhancing expressive ability with unique oriental charm. Water sleeves, calligraphy, hemp clothing, fish, and lanterns have become important forms of expression. A distinctive Chinese poetic aesthetic atmosphere was created by the masks hanging above the stage, the yellow cloth, and variously sized writing brushes. These elements integrated the traditional freehand brushwork aesthetic into classic Chinese stories with speculative value, bringing the charm and formal sense of Chinese performance to international theaters. The "A Word" establishes the work's quality. Artistic creations can articulate and convey the realm of the artist. The "Not Veiled" between the creator and the audience is paramount.

5. Conclusions

In brief, it is gratifying that in the contemporary exploration of drama with Chinese features, playwrights and directors have a better awareness and command of classical Chinese aesthetic ideas. They are adept at exploring Chinese native cultural content into stage expression and delving into the philosophical implications of theatrical performances taken as a whole. Artistic creators need to pursue a broader and more profound "A Word" expression. There is an increasing number of theatrical practices in contemporary drama exploring a more extensive and diverse path for development through appropriate language expression, unique oriental appeal, responsive maternal expression, and vivid stage symbols. It is crucial to be adept at exploring the philosophical implications of drama performances taken as a whole in the path where "A Word" and "Not Veiled" go hand in hand on the Chinese drama stage.

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