Chinese and Western Drama Traditions: 
a Comparative Perspective

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This article aims to draw a few similarities and differences between Western and Chinese theatre traditions. This will be done in a way that tries not to cast judgements or prefer one to the other.¹ This is a vast subject and space limitations preclude this essay from being in any way comprehensive in its scope. The structure is topical, which means that period is not the focus. However, most examples will be drawn from the 15th to the 19th centuries, corresponding approximately to the eras from the Renaissance to romanticism or high imperialism in the West, and to the late imperial period in China, especially the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties.

I focus on drama, which I understand as a form of theatre with three essential characteristics. These are: there is a story or plot; there are actors performing and impersonating individual characters; and there are interrelationships among the characters in the plot, even if they do not appear on stage.

This article will give no attention to such performance arts as dance, song, clowning or acrobatics unless they are within a drama or opera.

Genres of drama

Both the West and China have produced drama in many different traditions and genres. In the West there are plays from within

¹ In his monumental study of Chinese theatre, The Chinese Conception of the Theatre (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1985), Hsi Tao-Ching devotes the whole of Part V (pp. 363-667) to “The Chinese and the European Theatre”, especially comparisons and contrasts between the two. On p. 367 he states that “in this book no a priori assumption is made of the relative value of the Chinese and the European stage. They are to be compared as independent types, each existing in its own right”. The present writer shares this overall assumption.
many cultures that fall today within numerous different nation states. In such plays, dialogue or monologue through speech rather than song is usually primary. The West also has a magnificent tradition of opera, which is “the generic term for musical dramatic works in which the actors sing some or all of their parts”. “Opera is a union of music, drama and spectacle” and though these three “have been combined in different ways and degrees in different countries and historical periods”, music normally plays a dominant role. It arose at the beginning of the 17th century, which is in the first half of the period of focus here.

In China dramatic productions of the Ming and Qing belonged to the category nowadays termed \textit{xìqù}, which literally means “song theatre”. We can see the primacy of song here, and the \textit{xìqù} item in which there was no music was extremely rare. The “spoken drama” (\textit{huaju}), which features speech as primary, did not come into existence until the early 20th century. In \textit{xìqù}, “performance is stylised and conventionalised, and synthesises story, music, song, speech, dance and pantomime, and frequently martial arts and acrobatics as well”.

Clearly \textit{xìqù} is very similar to opera, but not identical. It is variously translated as “Chinese traditional theatre”, “Chinese music-drama” or “Chinese opera”.

The 16th century saw the development of an elite form of drama called \textit{Kanqù} in Kunshan, Jiangsu Province, very near Shanghai, the music of which was dominated by the Chinese transverse flute, or \textit{deq}. \textit{Kanqù} spawned a great many fine dramatists, but had declined drastically by the end of the 19th century. Meanwhile, a range of forms of popular regional theatre spread throughout both north and south China, spawning by the 19th century a style that is nowadays termed \textit{jingju} and usually known by its English translation Peking Opera, “a complex art integrating song, dance, acting, mime, acrobatics, music, and dialogue with elaborate costumes and performance techniques”.

One difference between China and the West is in social status and authorship. Drama as a form held a far lower status in China than it did in the West. Apart from the aristocratic \textit{Kanqù} mentioned above, the educated elite who determined social values regarded almost all Chinese drama of the 15th to the 19th centuries as so lowly as not really to count as literature at all. Indeed, the educated elite usually did not attend such dramas and could even be the target of social censure if they did. In the West, individual items might be condemned but the category “drama” was certainly literature and included some of the best literature of all.

In China, popular and regional theatre was actor-centred, not author-centred. Plays were based on earlier stories, novels and dramas, and we do not know the authors of the scripts of the great majority of traditional popular dramas, although those of \textit{Kanqù} are usually known. Popular dramas were mostly not even written down and were passed orally from one generation to the next. As for the music, we cannot attribute particular composers to the popular regional dramas. Even in the case of the \textit{Kanqù} the playwright simply selected an already known tune and assigned it to the lyrics he (there were no female playwrights in those days) had written, the composer of most of the tunes being unknown or irrelevant. Western dramas, including operas, tended to be more author- or composer-centred than in China. Of course, there is a great tradition of actors and singers, but it was the playwrights and the composers, not the performers, who carry on the mainstream of the tradition.

The purpose of drama

It is of course possible to read drama as well as perform it, provided it is written down. However, in considering the purpose of drama, I refer mainly to performance. In China, drama is more an exclusively performance art than in the West. Li Yu (c. 1611-80), a major playwright, theorist and man of the theatre wrote that the only reason for writing a play “is to have it performed.

onstage". While many in the West would agree, there may traditionally be many people who would feel they benefit from reading drama scripts even if they do not see them on stage.

Both the West and China have shared reasons for dramatic performance. In both civilisations, ordinary people have wished to be entertained and to socialise through drama. Indeed, audiences are extremely important for performance and they may see entertainment as the primary or sometimes even only purpose of drama. Yet, elites and philosophers in both China and the West have also perceived a range of other purposes besides entertainment, which they might consider more profound.

Christians have seen the purpose of drama to worship God and encourage audiences to follow the path of rectitude. A parallel but somewhat different Confucian notion takes a more prosaic and this-worldly approach, holding the purpose of drama as promoting social harmony and good relationships, with positive characters appropriate to show on stage being "righteous men and chaste women, filial sons and obedient grandsons".

Both civilisations have on occasion wished to put forward a particular political, social or ethical message through drama. The counterpoint of such a notion is censorship, especially the wish of governments to prevent the use of drama as a means of opposing them or trying to overthrow them. In China, with its generally unified imperial system, the emperors had censors keep an eagle eye for subversive or immoral dramas, and in 1777, the Qianlong Emperor (r.1736-96) set up a special commission to revise drama scripts so that they were in line with his Confucian moral and political standards, including that greatest of all Confucian virtues filial piety, as well as loyalty to the state and women's chastity.

The fourth-century thinker Roman writer Aelius Donatus approvingly quoted Cicero to the effect that comedy is "a copy of life, a mirror of custom, a reflection of truth". The image of the mirror is retained by the man with as good a claim as any to be called the greatest dramatist of all time, when he has Hamlet declare that "the purpose of playing ....was and is to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure". Compare that with four lines in the prologue to a fierce Roar with Song (Ge dai xuan), probably by the 16th-century Chinese playwright Xu Wei (1521-93). In somewhat less elevated and more cynical language they express a very similar point of view:

The world is full of defects from the start,  
So is man sly and wicked deep in his heart.  
What you see and hear every day  
Are more than enough for many a new play.

Plot

Naturally both in China and the West drama plots try to give play to emotions and both civilisations stress unity and coherence within the individual drama. Western dramas often follow the Ancient Greek model, a typical item seeing the plot exposed, followed by complicating factors, leading to a climax and denouement, with tension and conflict generally necessary and perhaps a surprise ending. Though most European dramas are set in Europe, there are quite a few that are not.

In terms of plot, the dramas of the Ming and Qing periods are very different from those of the West. For a start, other than mythical dramas set in such places as the Moon, all take place in China. They tend to be episodic rather than climactic. They are based on novels and stories and older dramas. There is certainly an element of surprise, complexity or crisis in many, but as one writer has expressed it, "plot structure was not a primary concern of the

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10 See Fei (ed. and trans.), Chinese Theories of Theater and Performance, p. 48.
dramatist” in traditional China.¹¹

One of the most important of all subdivisions of Chinese traditional dramas is uren (civil) and uren (military). A “civil drama” concerns romance, marriage and similar topics, while a “military” drama is about battles of old times, rebellion and civil war. In a typical romance drama, a scholar courts a young lady, whose parents may not be too keen on him, but who wins his bride by passing the civil-service examinations and entering the bureaucracy. Many of the military dramas are based on the historical novel The Romance of the Three Kingdoms (Sanguo yanyi), which is about the heroes of the Three Kingdoms period (220-65). This was an actual historical era, when China was rent by civil wars. It was a blood-soaked period, but one that gave famous figures the chance to behave with courage, loyalty, patriotism and brilliance, or alternatively treachery or stupidity. Short items focusing on an episode in the Three Kingdoms are particularly common in jingju. Characterisation is generally fairly simple, which means that it is rare to find admirable and negative features in the same person. George Souillé de Morant is probably right in his generalisation that, whereas love frequently prevails over duty in Western drama, an excellent example being Aida by Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901), what matters most in Chinese is “the merit of resistance, the proud joys of moral victory, […] the shame and dishonour of defeat”.¹²

Tragedy and comedy

One really important difference between China and the West is in the notion of tragedy. Aristotle enunciated a definition of tragedy that has exerted very profound influence over the whole of Western ideas of theatre. In Chapter 6 of his famous Poetics he wrote:

Chinese and Western Drama Traditions

Tragedy […] is an imitation of a worthy or illustrious and perfect action, possessing magnitude, in pleasing language, using separately the several species of imitation in its parts, by men acting, and not through narration, through pity and fear effecting a purification from such like passion.¹³

The word here translated “purification” is katharsis and unfortunately Aristotle did not develop it fully, as a result of which there has been debate over the centuries on precisely what he meant.¹⁴ However, there is general consensus on the notion that tragedy purifies the emotions in some profound way.

Another concept related to tragedy that has no real counterpart in Chinese theatre is the tragic hero whose downfall is due to some fault or error. Once again the source is Aristotle’s Poetics, which refers in Chapter 13 to the character “who neither excels in virtue and justice, nor is changed through vice and depravity, into misfortune, from a state of great renown and prosperity, but has experienced this change through some error”.¹⁵ The Greek term is hamartia, which refers to an event featuring a mistake or error, rather than a defect in character.¹⁶ However, again Aristotle’s precise meaning is open to interpretation and anyway not something cast in stone in the history of drama theory. Many have regarded the tragic hero as one who has fallen due to some fatal flaw in character, such as Othello, brought down by jealousy.

Some Chinese dramas have an unhappy or sad ending. However, there is in Chinese history no theory of tragedy equivalent to the one based on Aristotle. Moreover, Chinese commentators on traditional theatre generally believe that the Chinese prefer the happy ending. Wang Guowei (1877-1927), the greatest of the early modern Chinese drama critics, is an excellent example of this, finding a reason for this preference for happy endings in the spirit of the Chinese people:

¹¹ See Clark (comp.), European Theories of the Drama, p. 8.
China and Other Spaces

The spirit of our people is this—worldly and optimistic. Plays and novels of ancient times that exemplify this spirit are, without exception, all infused with this optimism: they begin sadly but end happily, they begin with separation but end with reunion, they begin with hardship but end with good fortune.

It is obvious from this that comedy was a more familiar form of theatre in China than tragedy, even defined loosely as a drama with a sad ending. We saw earlier the importance of entertainment as a purpose of drama. Among the most important of all themes for local small-scale theatre, as well as of more developed styles like jingju, has always been slapstick comedy based on courting or domestic problems, with the happy ending mandatory. If tragedy is one area where difference between Western and Chinese theatre predominates over similarity, then the converse is true for comedy.

Conventions

All theatres have their conventions. Those of the period of focus in the West, from the Renaissance to the late 19th century, were a developing, expanding and diversifying panoply of immensely complex practices. The 19th-century opera may have represented an acme of these conventions, at least in the sense that the combination of spectacle and sound reached its height in the grand operas of Giuseppe Verdi and the Gesamtkunstwerke (total art works) or music-dramas of Richard Wagner (1813-83).

Chinese theatre was hardly static from the 15th to the 19th centuries. After all, this was when the Kunqu and the jingju, as well as the array of regional theatre styles developed. It was a period when many of the conventions of the Chinese theatre took shape while those already in existence developed, becoming more stylized and aiming towards a “harmony of effect”. None of the integrated art-forms like song, speech, movement, costume and makeup could be emphasised at the expense of another. The performer who could sing beautifully but whose acting skills were less perfect or whose costuming was just a bit below par was less likely to make it in Chinese theatre than in Western opera. One very special feature of jingju was the highly complex and demanding but thrilling acrobatics of the military scenes, which have no real counterpart in the Western opera.

Theatres and stages

Western and Chinese theatres, including stages, have a great deal in common. In China the local temple was a frequent site for theatre, just as cathedrals were in medieval Europe and continued to be beyond the Renaissance. In China, stages were raised platforms or open spaces, some temples having permanent built stages. In these cases, the audience sat or stood in the open air, though the stage itself was covered.

In the Qing we see the rise of the big theatres, especially in Beijing. With the development of the jingju from the end of the 18th century came the largest kind of public theatre, which also functioned as a teahouse. These were located in the Outer City south of the Imperial Palaces. Seats were divided according to location and status, with the rich having access to much greater comfort, more space and a better view. The stage was a square thrust platform, with no front curtain, very little décor and only very simple stage properties. In the Elizabethan theatre, some of the audience stood in the open air, though there were covered galleries where people could sit with a good view of the stage. As in China, the stage was of the “thrust” type, with the audience sitting on three sides. There was no curtain at the front and décor and stage properties were simple or non-existent.

The following extract gives some comment on the comparison between the Chinese theatre and Western counterparts, and especially with the Elizabethan theatre in England:

The Chinese theatre is like the Elizabethan playhouse because the Chinese tea house is like the English inn-yard.

17 Quoted in Fei, Chinese Theories of Theater and Performance, p. 105.
Similarly, the early Spanish theatre called corral (yard) had almost the same construction and origin as the Elizabethan theatre...The arrangement of the audience in the galleries, in the yard and on the stage is identical with both the Chinese temple theatre and the tea-house theatre, the fact that in the tea-house theatre all spectators on the main floor have seats and that spectators always stand on the Chinese stage are of minor importance. Pictorial reconstructions of the Elizabethan theatre often look strikingly like a Chinese theatre. In spite of the adjuncts to the Elizabethan platform stage for which are no Chinese counterparts, the stages of the two theatres are also very similar, because among the various parts of the Elizabethan stage the platform is by far the most important acting space.

A development took place in Europe in the early 17th century that was to affect theatres and theatre-going very greatly, with profound consequences that are still visible in the present day. This was the rise of the theatre with a stage topped by a proscenium arch, or simply a “proscenium stage”. The first such stage was in the Teatro Farnese in Parma, Italy, which was completed in 1618. Instead of a thrust stage, the stage was like a picture frame and was dominated by a proscenium arch. Along with this development came complex décor and stage properties and the curtain at the front of the stage that could be raised or drawn aside to show the drama performance. The audience sat opposite the stage — not on three sides — and were entirely inside a theatre, with the possibility of extremely grand buildings.

Theatres with proscenium arches became widespread in England during the Restoration period in the second half of the 17th century. They coexisted throughout Europe with the older styles, becoming dominant by the 19th century. In China, the first real proscenium-stage theatre was the New Stage (Xin wutai), built in Shanghai in 1908. In other words, the proscenium stage was very much part of the modernisation of the Chinese theatre with the old style remaining dominant, almost to the point of being exclusive, right down to the end of the period of focus here.

The social status of the actor

Let us turn now from the stage to the people who performed on it. Both in China and the West, actors have tended to hold a low social status. In both civilisations actors were seen as wanderers without fixed address who led a life of make-believe. They were often associated with the sex industry and seen as being immoral and shameless, leading people astray, especially the youth. Men of higher social status might seek sexual favours from actors, but social respect as a group was a very different matter. Actors suffered legal discrimination of various kinds. In his La pratique du théâtre (published in 1657), François Hédélin, Abbé d’Aubignac, bemoaned the decline of the French theatre, seeing one reason in “the Infantry with which the Laws have noted those who make an open profession of being Players”. In China numerous laws against actors included several forbidding them or their families from sitting the civil service examinations that signalled entry into the bureaucracy and thus the cream of society. In both the West and China, the rise of the “star” raised the social status at least of some actors, but in the case of China that did not even begin to happen until the late 19th century.

One interesting phenomenon is the playing of female roles by men or boys. In the theatre of the Yuan dynasty (1280-1368), women could play female roles, but in the Ming and Qing dynasties, the vast majority of troupes were exclusively male, though there were also a few that were all female, mostly prostitutes. In medieval European plays, priests or other men usually played the parts of women. It was not until the end of the 17th century that it became normal for actresses to perform female roles. There were social reasons in both civilisations that made it difficult or impossible for ordinary women to go on the stage, but the implication was that impersonating women became a major skill for a certain type of male actor. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), perhaps the greatest of German playwrights, exulted

22 See the discussion in Hsu, The Chinese Conception of the Theatre, pp. 620-2.
in the skills of the female impersonator. “We see a youth who has studied the idiosyncrasies of the female sex in their character and behavior; he has learned to know them, and reproduces them as artist”, he wrote. “We come to understand the female sex so much the better because some one has observed and meditated on their ways”.24 Both in the West and in China, there was an association between these young actors and homosexuality.

Conclusion

One question to arise from the foregoing material is whether the differences between Chinese and Western theatres outweigh the similarities, or vice versa. For me, the main features of Western drama that set it apart from Chinese are in the vast developments that followed from the Aristotelian nature of tragedy and dramatic structure, and in the rise of the proscenium stage from the 17th century on. These developments implied many other changes, including an acceleration of the scale of change in the drama, the increasing complexity of mise en scène and the rise of the stars among actors. On the other side, Chinese drama was probably a more generally integrated art form than Western, with the various skills and arts, like song, gesture, costumes and story, locking into each other more firmly. The main similarities are in the universality of comedy, the entertainment and moral purposes of drama (though with a somewhat different set of moral values) and the whole nature of theatres and the acting profession before the 18th century. Probably the differences are more fundamental than the similarities, even if the actual number of them is no greater.

It may be possible to make an evaluation of the two drama traditions based on these similarities and differences. However, it seems to me that this would necessitate laying down careful criteria, which themselves would likely be open to question. For example, is the extent of change within a tradition more important than the degree of integration in any art-form? My personal preference is to abstain from making judgements and to accept each tradition on its own terms and applying its own criteria.

Photographs

The reconstructed Globe Theatre, London, taken by Colin Mackerras before an afternoon performance of *As You Like It* in August 2006. Note the “thrust” structure of the stage. Part of the theatre is open air, as can be seen by the sun shining in.

An in situ temple stage in the Wuye Temple in the famous Buddhist mountain Wutai shan, Shanxi Province, taken by Colin Mackerras during a morning performance in October 2006. Note that the audience sits or stands in the open air. Audience members with seats are those who have paid for the honour of choosing the item to be performed, others watching for free.