

On the Construction of Aesthetic Image in Stage Art Creation for Mei Lanfang's "Ancient Costume Modern Plays"

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Received: 16 March 2022; Accepted: 29 March 2022; Published: 7 April 2022

Abstract:

Mei Lanfang successively launched a series of "ancient costume modern plays" with ancient costume and classical dance as the innovation point with the help of the scholars of "mei fans" from the 1910s to the 1920s, which not only led the "retro" in the drama industry at that time, but also established its position in the drama world. The "new" of "ancient costume modern plays" lies in that, on the one hand, ancient costume modern plays are written and directed in a way different from the traditional writing and directing, that is, ancient costume modern plays make an overall planning for the script, performance and stage art and construct a stage aesthetic artistic conception with classical beauty; on the one hand, it lies in the innovation of stage art represented by clothing and scenery. Based on the overall aesthetic image, the research on the stage art creation of "ancient costume modern plays" can clarify Mei Lanfang's ideas and methods of opera innovation at this stage, and provide reference for the development of contemporary opera.

Keywords:

Mei Lanfang, Ancient Costume Modern Plays, Costumes, Scenery

1. Introduction

"Ancient costume modern plays" are Mei Lanfang's creative practice based on the commercial needs of the play market at home and abroad, taking the "classical beauty" of Chinese traditional art as the benchmark under the historical background of the era requirements for cultural improvement and the collision between Chinese and Western cultures. This series of new plays has not only been greatly welcomed by domestic audiences, but also become a stepping stone for Mei Lanfang to promote the art of opera to the international stage, thus laying the foundation for overseas audiences' understanding of Chinese opera. The creative experience at this stage also greatly affected Mei Lanfang's performance style and the formation of drama theory system, which is an important entry point for us to interpret his artistic concept. At present, the research on "ancient costume modern plays" mostly focuses on the history of classical song and dance performance methods, drama creation and

arrangement, and editing, or discussion of the drama concepts and aesthetic thoughts of Mei Lanfang, Qi Rushan and others through this history, but there are few special studies on stage art. Mei Lanfang not only undertakes the important task of classical song and dance creation and performance in the “ancient costume modern plays”, but also fully participates in the process of stage art creation. His thoughts on opera reform and those of the scholar of “mei fans” are also clearly reflected in the creation of stage art, especially in the design of clothing and scenery.

2. Integrity of Collective Editing and Performing Method and Aesthetic Image Construction Method of “Ancient Costume Modern Plays”

Guided by scholar creation groups around, Mei Lanfang successively edited and performed 13 “ancient costume modern plays” such as *Chang E Flying to the Moon* and *Fairy Sending Flowers* from 1915 to 1927. With ancient costume modeling and classical dance as the highlights, Mei Lanfang led the retro of creating and editing ancient costume plays, and also established the industry status of Mei Lanfang’s four famous Dans. Different from the editing method of “temporary opera” in traditional opera, which combines the stage art elements such as costumes and props of the old play with the cast according to the actual situation of the troupe, the editing method of “ancient costume modern plays” is called as “collective compilation” by Mei Lanfang, that is, under the collective overall planning of the scholar of “mei fans”, the scholar of “mei fans” gives full play to their respective strengths, and divides and creates various stage expression elements such as clothing, props, music and performance to pursue the harmony between content and form as well as form and form.

The trend of opera reform in the early years of the Republic of China was not only reflected in the innovation of theme, but also in the innovation of stage art concept. The introduction and integration of western realistic art style and dance beauty technology have become an important means for major troupes to compete in business. For example, the “new stage” in Shanghai, which leads the national fashion, began to perform Peking Opera with real scenes and electric light sources in 1908. In such an environment, the “ancient costume modern plays” came into being. In addition to the reform of the editing concept, its stage setting and lighting are innovative when compared with the traditional Peking opera stage, and the clothing also reflects the adaptation to the new stage environment. Mei Lanfang’s innovation is based on his cognition of the relationship between the stage environment of old and new operas and character performance as well as clothing. He clearly pointed out that the stage environment needs to be coordinated with character performance, and that the relationship between the two shall be considered as a whole in the early stage of creation. He said: according to my experience, we can only use the set when rehearsing a new play... *Jun Xi Ren* is a one-act play. There are two three-dimensional panoramic views of the study and bedroom on the stage. The furnishings and props used are all moved from my home. Focusing on the realistic method, actors can only reduce lyrics, but increase the dialogue when performing in this environment. It can be seen that the set is closely related to the performance. When writing a script, we shall design the set in it. In this way, all may be more harmonious.”^[1], namely, overall planning of stage art through writing and directing, so as to achieve the harmonious effect between stage media such as clothing and props and performances. Similarly, from the perspective of modern visual perception research, “to see any object in space means to see it in some context or background... More specifically, any viewing is

viewing in a set of relationships.”^[2] Therefore, the creation of single media shall not be analyzed without the overall stage environment, but the creation of stage media shall coordinate with each other to jointly construct the overall aesthetic image. As the auxiliary of character performance, stage media such as clothing and setting determine that the core of its creation must highlight, strengthen and enrich character performance.

3. Curtain and Clothing of “Old Play”

The stage medium of opera mainly includes the curtain, props, machine-operated stage scenery, lighting, costumes and other systems arranged on the stage. “Old play” refers to the play edited and performed in the traditional way before the opera reform movement of the Republic of China. The setting on the stage of “old play” mainly includes curtain, one table and two chairs, where curtain, a huge, richly decorated embroidered fabric hanging at the back of the stage, undertakes the functions of shielding the backcourt, decorating the stage and planning the way of entering on and going off the stage. When the painting realistic setting began to be used for the Beijing Opera, the curtain was also called “shoujiu”. For this title, Gong Hede explained: “what ‘jiu’ is ‘shou’ is the void principle of the traditional stage. “shoujiu” is the void that provides the audience with such a way of observation but not a plot place as well as accommodates and expresses all plot places.” [3] This “void” means that the curtain is universal and neutral. The pattern content on it has nothing to do with the play and does not have the function of revealing the plot. On the modern opera stage, both traditional and modern operas often use the minimalist background to highlight the characters, that is, hang a monochrome curtain behind the stage or decorate some simple graphics on the curtain. Even if concrete images are used, they will be virtualized or deconstructed to strive not to cover the characters. Mei Lanfang also suggested the adoption of monochrome flat screen with dark lines on the modern stage in the later stage of his artistic career, believing that “on this plain flat screen, it may help highlight the actors on the stage” [4]. Highlighting the visual focus through simple and complex comparison is a merited artistic treatment method from a modern perspective. On the basis of such cognition, it is natural to have doubts about the seemingly chaotic relationship between the same intricately ornamented scenery and character costumes on the stage of “old play”. In this regard, Gong Hede explained from the viewing tradition of opera, “because curtain has been a routine of stage furnishings for hundreds of years, people turn a blind eye to it and do not think about its significance.” [5] That is, the curtain can be regarded as a fixed device of a certain troupe or stage. No matter what plays are performed, it does not need to be replaced and it is also natural for the audience that embroidered dragon and phoenix or embroidered bird on the curtain is decorative and does not have ideographic function. Therefore, it will not affect the audience’s attention to the actor’s performance and understanding of the plot naturally. Mei Lanfang put forward more targeted questions and made explanations based on the thinking of the relationship between visual elements on the stage. “In the old square stage, the curtain is mostly embroidered with large red satin plain gold, which is suitable for the style of oil brocade color paintings on the stage beam column railings, and is also consistent with the table and seat drapes on the stage. These things complement each other and do not contradict each other. I once thought that the large red satin plain gold embroidery shall be dazzling to the audience, and that the embroidered robe embroidered with gold thread on the satin ground shall be said to be in the same color, but it is not dazzling nor in the same color. Why? I think there are probably the following reasons: red and gold are very

bright, but when they are together, there is no contrast between the two. Although the patterns also include phoenix colored peony, or lion rolling hydrangea, the gold thread and color thread are intricately used, and the base is covered with decorative plain gold patterns. In this way, the gold and red colors are not prominent, and the whole layout is dense, so the pattern content seems to be non-prominent.” [4] Traditional embroidery patterns and color matching methods are used in the curtain and costumes in the “old play”, and the consistency in decoration techniques and styles brings visual harmony. Therefore, the set will not conflict with the characters’ costumes due to the complexity of visual elements, making people feel “dazzling”. This kind of stage tradition that highlights the characters through the digestion of the meaning of the setting reflects the virtual artistic characteristics of traditional opera and the audience’s watching habit formed for a long time in the historical development, but this habit has also changed with the change of the performance environment.

4. Painting Setting of “Ancient Costume Modern Plays” and “Ancient Costume”

With the replacement of the old tea garden by the new theater in the early years of the Republic of China, the performance environment of opera changed dramatically. For example, “Xin Wu Tai”, China’s first new theater known as the “originator of the stage”, has completely changed the architectural structure of the old tea garden with column square platform in terms of overall space. The semicircular seat layout revolves around the half-moon stage which is equipped with rotating stage, set and curtain. The new stage is wide and well illuminated, the seats are clean and comfortable, and the viewing environment is civilized and orderly. With the continuous emergence of new theatres, the stage art design of opera has also changed. There are also “curtains of different colors, some of which are still embroidered with red satin or painted with cloth” [4]. “Painting on cloth” refers to the painting curtain, which enters China with the Japanese and Western stage art creators originally employed by Shanghai Theater, and takes realistic painting as the main form of expression. Once introduced, it immediately became the mainstream background form of the new improved stage at that time. Whether traditional drama or fashion drama, specific scenes related to the plot, such as ancient palaces, gardens or modern streets and stations, are displayed through the curtain of realistic painting.

In the early “ancient costume modern plays”, a large number of attempts were made to use realistic painting screens. In order to enrich the sense of hierarchy of the scene, the combination composition method of plane curtain and three-dimensional set is also adopted on the stage. For example, in *Lin Daiyu Buries Fallen Flowers*, three-dimensional stage devices such as pavilions and rockeries are matched with the flat garden scenery curtain. However, Mei Lanfang also gradually realized that the realistic plane painting curtain was difficult to serve the flexible spatial processing and virtual performance methods of traditional opera. “Just putting a few scenes cannot play any role” [6]. Therefore, in the later stage of the ancient costume modern plays, more attention is paid to the three-dimensional set serving the song and dance scene. “Now I still use the play with set and there is only one play called *Goddess of the Luo River* which cannot be performed without the set because the set closely combined with the performing art was designed when the script was written.” [6] In order to vividly show the scenes of many fairies in the clouds, the early *Fairy Sending Flowers* used the stage environment treatment method of “setting the stage and cutting into a mountain” in traditional opera to increase the three-dimensional level of

space; flexibly used “one table, two chairs” and other basic stage devices in combination with virtual performance to express the characteristics of the environment. “Behind is a cloud view. Sixteen square tables are placed at the back of the stage. The cloud view is dragged on the ground, and the front of the table is also covered with cloud view... Sixteen tables occupy the second half of the stage. The whole cloud view is coordinated from top to bottom in the sight of the audience.” [7] This three-dimensional set “cloud stage”, which serves for the performance, has been further used in the later *Goddess of the Luo River*. The stage of *Meeting on the River* uses a three-layer platform to show the overlapping trend of fairy islands, and the series of dance movements specially created for *Goddess of the Luo River* also need to “cover every floor and every corner”, so “performance is impossible in case there is no set”.

Although the application of realistic painting curtain and three-dimensional setting in ancient costume modern plays is affected by the popularity of the times, its overall artistic style has been neutralized to a certain extent. On the basis of following the provisions of realistic expression methods such as perspective, proportion and shape accuracy, it integrates the aesthetic pursuit of Chinese traditional painting to a certain extent, including the freehand expression of weakening details and paying attention to the scene atmosphere, so as to minimize the limitation of mobility stage time and space. In the research on modern opera, the Dan role dress in “ancient costume modern plays” is collectively referred to as “ancient costume” or “Mei school ancient costume”, including clothing, hairstyle and make-up, which is very different from the Dan role dress in traditional Beijing Opera. Gong Hede summarized the overall characteristics of “ancient costume” as: “diversified bun, beauty highlighting of women’s body, and fresh and natural decorative style are the basic characteristics” [8]; Tan Yuanjie summarized it as: “the clothes are inside, the skirt is outside and the waist is tied with a belt to fit the body, making the lower body long and slender” [9]. “Ancient costume” presents a light, graceful, elegant and simple artistic style. Compared with traditional opera costumes, it is more light and simple. On the one hand, it is to adapt to the performance mode dominated by song and dance, and on the other hand, it is harmonious with the elegant and simple stage environment in terms of aesthetic taste and decoration methods. The overall artistic style orientation of “classical beauty” established in the early stage of the creation of the play unifies the creation and expression of various stage media such as clothing, scenery and props in the stage creation centered on song and dance performance through the overall division of labor in the editing stage, so that all stage elements can participate in the construction of stage aesthetic image.

5. Conclusions

“Ancient costume modern plays” are not only an innovative product to adapt to commercial competition and current affairs, but also an important achievement of Mei Lanfang’s reform and exploration of Peking Opera. His stage art creation embodies the inheritance of the aesthetic ideas in ancient painting, sculpture, dance and literature. Through the transformation of traditional art forms into stage media, he constructed the stage aesthetic artistic conception with classical beauty. His collective editing and directing method centered on the scholars of “mei fan”, including the comprehensive consideration and overall planning of the play text, character modeling, dance posture and stage environment, has had an important impact on the specific expression form of stage art media. How to deal with the relationship between

inheritance and innovation in stage art creation is still an outstanding problem in contemporary opera creation. The stage art creation of “ancient costume modern plays” not only reflects Mei Lanfang’s in-depth thinking and positive practice on the relationship between classical aesthetics and modern aesthetics, stage performance and audience acceptance, and Chinese and Western culture, but also shows that Mei Lanfang, as an artist, not only tirelessly polished his own performance, but also practiced the aesthetic pursuit of opera art in all links of stage art creation. In addition, this spirit of thinking and practice will still inspire contemporary creators to actively explore the way of inheritance and innovation of opera.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Funding

This work was supported by the IFA Fashion Art Research Center, Key Research Base of Humanities and Social Sciences in Colleges and Universities in Hubei, Project Name: Research on Red Drama and Stage Art, Project No.: IFA-2021-06.

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