

A Comparative Study of Chinese Traditional Puppetry and British Puppetry: Contrasting Characteristics, Performative Styles, and Educational Function

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Abstract

Puppetry, as one form of performing arts, exists in various countries around the world, including China, the United Kingdom, the Czech Republic, Malaysia, and more. It holds significant historical and performative value within each nation's cultural and artistic traditions. Through research, it has been discovered that puppets from different countries exhibit notable differences. The research objective of this article is to compare Chinese and English puppets, primarily focusing on their physical characteristics, performance styles, and functional applications. Exploring their differences and similarities. This research employs a qualitative research methodology, conducting interviews with renowned figures in the field of puppetry and utilizing comparative case study analysis to explore the differences between Chinese and British puppetry and their integration in a new phase. Furthermore, while analyzing textual data, the study identifies a utilization of puppets between the two countries. Puppets can serve as an educational tool (Råde, 2021) with a relative impact and role. It reveals that in the United Kingdom, puppets have long served as educational tools, utilizing puppetry in educational activities to foster children's expressive abilities, creativity, and other skills. However, in China, puppets predominantly remain confined to the stage.

Keywords

Comparative; Chinese traditional puppetry; British puppetry; Style; Educational function.

1. INTRODUCTION

As a unique form of performance, puppetry has always held an important place in the theater. However, the puppetry performance styles and historical backgrounds of different countries vary significantly, all displaying strong ethnic characteristics. Through reviewing current literature, it is found that most research focuses on the unique features of each country's puppetry, or only compares Eastern and Western styles. Therefore, this study selects Chinese and English puppets as representatives for comparison, highlighting their development in theater education in addition to their stylistic characteristics.

In China, puppetry has a long history dating back over two thousand years. Puppetry in ancient China was known as "Kuilei Xi", characterized by exquisite craftsmanship and advanced techniques in puppet making. The puppets were adorned with elaborate and magnificent costumes that reflected the attire of the characters they represented. Puppetry performances in China primarily revolved around folk tales and were also incorporated into ceremonial events, showcasing the rich diversity of local customs and traditions. On the other hand, puppetry in England also has its unique traditional charm. British puppetry traces its origins

back to medieval Europe. The most significant difference between British puppetry and traditional Chinese puppetry lies in their physical appearance. British puppets come in various sizes, ranging from large-scale mechanical puppets to small paper puppets. These puppets often have distinct character features and are frequently used to portray comedic roles, narrating witty and humorous social stories. Although there are clear differences between the puppetry traditions of the two countries, there is also an element of artistic fusion. Chinese and English puppetry share similarities in artistic expression and social value, allowing for the possibility of artistic integration between the two cultures.

Therefore, this article will delve into various aspects of Chinese and English puppetry, examining their influence on culture and society. Through comparative research, it aims to identify shortcomings and promote cultural exchange between the two puppetry traditions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

A literature review can help researchers understand the perspectives of others on a particular topic. It can also enable researchers to see the results of other related studies.(Jack R & Norman E,2009) This chapter reviews the literature on the comparison between Chinese and Western puppetry, as well as the current development status of puppetry education in China and the UK.

Regarding the differences between Chinese and Western puppets, according to Ding(1996)research , the unique viewing experience of Chinese puppets is a significant difference from the diversity and openness of Western puppet varieties. However, there are also commonalities in puppetry around the world, leading to continuous integration and evolution of Chinese and Western puppets.(Huang, 2021) Chinese puppet shows are mainly composed of two elements: performance art and sculptural art. (Feng, 2021) In the England, it was a fashionable entertainment for the wealth and frequently went on world tours in the late 19th century.(Currell,2014) Although Chinese and Western puppetry differ in many aspects, with the development of time, Western puppetry has been introduced into China. Under various factors such as contemporary aesthetic styles, cultural concepts, and entertainment demands, it has continuously influenced the final presentation of contemporary Chinese puppetry forms.(Huang,2021)

In terms of drama education, puppets have made great contributions to children's learning and development.(Fourie, 2009) They can improve language expression abilities. (Zuraidah & Syamsi & Ashadi, 2020) In the United Kingdom, Puppetry is a great educational tool. Puppets can dramatize any situation or story that stirs the imagination of the children.(Hilton,1967) A British experiment demonstrated that the use of puppets significantly increased the amount of teacher discourse focused on reasoning and argumentation, while reducing the amount of talk focused on recall. Through the use of puppets, teachers also employed more narration to set up science in a stimulating environment and encouraged children to contribute to the entire classroom discussion.(Simon&Naylor..&Downing,2008) China's drama education is constantly improving, but we should also see that there are still obvious shortcomings in drama education, Traditional Chinese puppets are not always suitable for drama education. For example, Quanzhou string puppets are more intended to meet religious needs. (Huang,2021) There is a great potential for the development of the educational function of Chinese puppetry. According to Chu (2017) research, traditional Chinese glove puppets are very suitable for children's teaching because they are easy to handle. They are also similar to Western object puppets. Therefore, for Chinese traditional puppets to become educational tools, they need to be integrated with Western puppetry. Firstly, the essence of drama education is to cultivate people through aesthetic education, not to train professional actors, emphasizing education.(Wang, 2019) Therefore, the purpose of integrating traditional puppets into drama education is not necessarily to train puppet inheritors, but to develop personal qualities through using

traditional puppets as teaching tools.

Puppetry, as a unique form of art, exists in various countries. Through literature review, it is found that there have been studies on both Chinese and Western puppetry, but there is relatively little research on the comparison between Chinese traditional puppetry and UK puppetry, especially in terms of cross-cultural comparison and cultural heritage. Moreover, the literature suggests a clear difference between the two in that there are already numerous puppetry applications in contemporary cultural systems in the UK, (Purcell-Gates&Smith,2020) while Chinese traditional puppetry remains mostly confined to the stage.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

Research methods are constantly summarized and extracted in the process of scientific research. People face different factors such as the Angle of the problem, the complexity of the research object, the methods used are different. Research methods are also a dynamic development process of mutual influence, combination and transformation. There are many ways to study different problems. The research objectives to: 1) compare the similarities and differences between Chinese and British puppetry in terms of historical origins, performance styles, artistic styles, and character style. 2) explore the current status and development of the use of Chinese and British puppetry in the field of theater education.

The two main methods for collecting data include the following: 1) Documents review: which involves searching relevant books, journals, and papers from Google Scholar and CNKI to gather historical, cultural, and artistic information on Chinese and Britain puppetry. These literature sources will provide a conceptual understanding of studying puppetry in two different countries, such as historical development, puppet types, performance styles, and more. They form the foundation of the research. By reading these literature sources, key concepts can be extracted to identify similarities and differences between the puppetry traditions of the two countries. 2) Semi-structure Interviews: Inviting a Chinese puppetry expert who graduated from the first batch of puppetry major at the Shanghai Theatre Academy and has been working in the Chinese puppetry industry for over twenty years. This professional is not only familiar with traditional Chinese puppetry but also has had some exposure to Western puppetry. The interview will focus on the differences between Chinese and British puppetry and the current application status of Chinese traditional puppetry in drama education. The data analysis method is content analysis, all interviews are recorded and transcribed verbatim to identify key words and analyze their meanings.

It is important to note that this study has certain limitations. As a qualitative research, the selection of research participants is purposive and not based on large-scale sampling, which means the findings cannot be generalized to all practitioners of puppetry. Therefore, the results of this study are limited to the scope of available resources and should be interpreted within that context.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. Chinese and English Puppets

"Chinese puppetry art originated in the Han Dynasty, flourished during the Tang and Song Dynasties, and has a history of at least 2,000 years. It is a long-standing theatrical art form in China, which has been passed down for thousands of years and remains popular today." (Huang, 2021) Similarly, English puppetry is highly acclaimed worldwide, with a history of more than 600 years and an important part of popular theater in England.

4.2. Chinese Puppets

As early as the Han Dynasty, there were historical records of puppetry, which reached its peak during the Song Dynasty. Today, Chinese puppets enjoy a high reputation worldwide due to their superb skills. According to the work of Huang Ranran (2021), the birth of traditional Chinese puppetry was initially to meet religious needs, and the first puppets appeared in ancient sacrificial activities. Later, due to historical reasons and the relatively peaceful and stable environment in Fujian, puppetry developed well in this region. String, rod, and glove puppet companies perform in various regional styles.(Howard, 1978)

Rod Puppetry—The performance manipulation of puppetry is mainly reflected in the use of a main rod connected to the puppet's head and side rods attached to the puppet's limbs for control, making the performance form of puppetry more diverse. Puppeteers design various puppet movements to make the performance of puppetry more flexible and diverse.

Hand Puppetry—Zhangzhou hand puppetry is a comprehensive art form that integrates various artistic means such as performance, music, production, props, and stage design. It belongs to the category of puppetry and is a valuable artistic expression mode. Zhangzhou hand puppetry has special requirements during performances, and from the performer's technique perspective, it emphasizes the support of the hand as the main structure and soul of puppetry performance.

String Puppetry—This type of puppetry is mainly performed through string manipulation. After the puppet's image is made, the strings are wrapped around the movable parts of the puppet's body and used to control the puppet's movements on stage.

4.3. British Puppets

Reference to Ding Yanzhao(1996) reveals that puppet artists refer to Punch as the origin of English puppetry. In fact, Punch is also a puppet, and the traditional puppet play "Punch and Judy" can be seen in many parts of England. This performance can even be viewed at the wax museum in London. In addition to traditional types such as stick, glove, and string puppets, there are also some item puppets in England:

Object Puppets—To give life to inanimate objects such as tables, chairs, umbrellas, books, and other everyday items, using abstract and simulated movements to spark infinite associations in the minds of audiences.

Paper Puppets—After being cut and glued, the paper is made into various figures of 10-15 centimeters, with metal wires or thin wooden sticks attached to their backs. The performer manipulates them from behind the scenes.

4.4. Differences between Chinese and English puppets

Chinese puppetry expert Tang believes that the audience range and level of technical difficulty are the biggest differences between Chinese and English puppets. This study focuses on comparing two well-developed hand puppetry plays from both countries, "Punch and Judy" from England and "The Grand Secretariat" from China. Firstly, in terms of performance techniques, Chinese puppetry emphasizes on technical skills. During performances, puppeteers not only need to coordinate with music, but also demonstrate difficult physical movements. The overall style is more similar to traditional opera performances, and as experts have said, Chinese puppets require performers to be "not real but lifelike." On the other hand, English hand puppetry is easier to grasp, and its openness allows the general public to participate. The focus is more on drama and storytelling. Secondly, Chinese traditional puppetry tends to choose opera roles such as "Sheng Dan Jing Chou Mo," while Punch in England is characterized as a clown. Thirdly, the two countries' puppetry styles have their own characteristics. Chinese traditional puppetry has a considerable proportion of "martial arts" performances, mainly combining acrobatics and martial arts performance art forms.(Ni,2022) In contrast, the skill

aspect of Punch is less emphasized. The puppets usually interact with the audience by asking them questions and engaging them in the story. In terms of dialogue, Chinese traditional puppetry often uses local dialects, while "Punch and Judy" in England uses a special instrument placed in the mouth to produce Punch's voice. In terms of performance venues, "Punch and Judy" in England is a cultural practice that is situated in the marginal social spheres of carnival, fairground, and market-place,(Shershow,1994) while Chinese puppetry requires specific theaters and stages to showcase, with a certain sense of distance from the audience.

4.5. Integration of Chinese and British Puppets

Ding (1996) pointed out that after summarizing the commonalities of puppetry around the world, "puppetry is a comprehensive performing art that combines scripts, directors, actors, stage design, character modeling, music, and lighting." The origins of Chinese and English puppets were also to meet religious needs.(Huang, 2021) As a form of performing art, they play an important role in the cultural heritage of their respective countries. In modern times, they have merged with each other several times. According to Guo(2016)research, in the mid to late 19th century, at least three Western puppetry troupes came to Shanghai to perform for Chinese and foreign audiences. Nowadays, puppetry has begun to reform, targeting children as their audience. They use human-like puppets to stage stories that children enjoy. This new type of puppetry uses puppets to perform dramas, with Western-style puppetry content and minimal emphasis on character action and characterization, which is fundamentally different from traditional Chinese puppetry.(Yu, 1957)

A classic example of Chinese puppetry incorporating elements of English puppetry is the 2019 performance of "The Last War Elephant," which features various elements that can be traced back to the English classic puppet play "War Horse." Firstly, this was the first time that China used large-scale installation puppets, making it the largest puppet in Asia. Secondly, similar to "War Horse",The audience can always see the puppeteers; you can see how they work the mechanisms that move the horses' legs, and you can watch how they manipulate the horses'ears.(Birke, 2010) Thirdly, the production of "The Last War Elephant" also involved a British multimedia company in stage design and puppet-making, representing the successful exchange and integration between China and the UK.

The influence of English puppetry has changed the performance format and target audience of traditional Chinese puppetry, and this change in audience also means that the elements of the play's subject matter, performance style, and artistic language must undergo corresponding changes. This transformation cannot be separated from borrowing from English art as a model. Whether it is the selection of play themes or the final presentation on stage, it reflects the formal borrowing from English puppetry art.

4.6. Chinese and British Puppets in Drama Education

The study of using puppets in drama education can be traced back to the last century, and in the UK, puppets have always been a popular tool in drama classrooms. Using puppets can break the traditional teaching methods in the classroom, such as case studies, PowerPoint presentations, or outdoor physics problem-solving projects. Finger puppets are often used in teaching activities, and according to Kempster's (2015) research, the imagination of finger puppets allows for a mix of facts, fiction, reflection, and curiosity. In the 1970s and 1980s, after the war, three organizations existed to cater for puppetry(Francis, 1992): the British Puppet and Model Theatre Guild, the British section of UNIMA, and the Educational Puppet Association (EPA). The Educational Puppetry Association in England is an association composed of many different people who are interested in puppetry. There are various puppet schools and training classes in the UK, and puppets have been fully integrated into the education model, especially in language teaching. 'The use of puppets can improve the motivation and storytelling skill of elementary school students.' (Zuraidah & Syamsi & Ashadi, 2020) Puppets can also help

children with special educational needs, motivating and supporting children who have difficulty in communication and interaction and developing their social skills.

In China, the role of puppets in drama education has not been prominently highlighted, and there are several reasons for this: Firstly, traditional Chinese puppets have always been regarded as intangible cultural heritage, more often displayed on stage and in museums, with little attention paid to their educational function. Secondly, traditional Chinese puppets have always had high demands for performance skills, and puppet inheritors have undergone years of training to reach performance standards. Only two universities in China have truly established puppetry courses,(Wang, 2019)and such courses are aimed at cultivating professional puppet performers, and traditional puppets have not yet been widely used in drama education for the general public. In the United Kingdom, in addition to prestigious universities like the University of London, the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, and the University of the Arts London, many performing arts and theatre practice programs also offer courses in puppetry. However, in China, apart from specialized puppetry programs, other performing arts majors do not typically include puppetry courses. As a rough estimate, it is believed that only around 40 graduates from puppetry programs in China each day are able to find positions in professional puppetry troupes or become puppetry instructors. Of course, some researchers have proposed solutions to this problem, such as using traditional Chinese glove puppets for children's teaching, (Chu, 2017) as glove puppets are essentially a piece of cloth that even young children can control. In recent years, due to education reform in China, puppets have also appeared in some primary schools' weekly interest classes. The use of traditional Chinese puppets not only cultivates students' quality like British puppets but also has cultural inheritance significance.

5. CONCLUSION

The puppet arts of both countries have strong regional characteristics, distinct social and historical features, and rich ethnic characteristics. This article finds that puppets, as a form of performing arts, objectively exist in every country and have a special status in the world. This article compares and describes the puppets of China and the UK, and finds that although Chinese puppets have not been as widespread as British puppets, they have their unique performance value. From an aesthetic perspective, the theatricalization of puppets and their imitation of real people reinforce the assumed nature and theatricality of performances. Similarly, the popularization of British puppets also demonstrates their strength and versatility, as they can exist on stage, in the classroom, on the streets, and even on the beach, used for education and therapy. The differences and mutual integration of puppets in the two countries ultimately aim to bring out the strengths of each puppet and enrich their respective puppet arts through mutual integration.

6. LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has certain limitations, which are mainly manifested as follows:

1) Limitation of research scope: This paper primarily focuses on the comparison between Chinese and English puppetry, selecting specific countries that may not represent the overall differences between Eastern and Western puppetry or be applicable to comparative studies in other countries.

2) Insufficient literature review: The analysis of historical development, stylistic characteristics, and other aspects of puppetry in both countries heavily relies on existing literature. Due to limitations in resources and the timeliness of literature, the research may have inherent biases.

3) Time and geographical constraints: This study conducted expert interviews but did not involve fieldwork or on-site investigations, which limits the depth and breadth of the analysis.

Through this comparative study, it can be observed that the application of traditional Chinese puppetry in educational theater is still in a relatively slow development stage compared to the United Kingdom. In light of this, the author provides the following suggestions:

1) Introducing puppetry courses in schools: At present, some schools have established drama clubs and incorporated theater education into their curriculum. In this process, traditional Chinese puppetry can be introduced, for example, using puppets in English classes to enhance students' language skills and communication abilities.

2) Organizing related practical activities: As one of the important treasures of China's intangible cultural heritage, puppetry requires collective efforts for its preservation. Particularly, primary and secondary schools, as important places for nurturing the next generation, should introduce and cultivate excellent puppetry teachers. Students can engage in practical activities such as puppet-making, scriptwriting, and puppetry rehearsals, and eventually have the opportunity to perform on stage.

3) Training of teaching staff: As mentioned above, there are only two institutions in China that offer specialized puppetry programs. The number of graduates each year is insufficient to meet the demand for teaching in schools nationwide. Therefore, teacher training programs in arts education and drama performance courses can incorporate traditional Chinese puppetry to cultivate outstanding puppetry educators.

Puppetry in the United Kingdom has successfully integrated with theater education, fostering holistic development in students. Additionally, puppetry has been employed for therapeutic purposes in special education. Traditional Chinese puppetry needs to embrace innovation and continuous development. Its integration into theater education requires joint efforts from various stakeholders.

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