



Analysis of the Beijing Opera Facial Masks based on the Chinese Traditional Culture

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Abstract

This paper introduces the types and features of Beijing Opera facial masks, as well as the limitations of the “essence determines appearance” thinking pattern of Chinese traditional culture. The Chinese Beijing Opera facial masks are one of the symbols of Chinese traditional culture, while carrying forward the essence, it also disseminates the dress that the good people look good and the bad people look ugly. It is a wrong way to pursue too much of the people’s appearance and even simply use it as a yardstick to judge good or bad. This method can provide misunderstanding to many good people who are not good-looking in real life. Applying the classification of the opera facial masks in real life will hurt many good people with the ordinary appearance and will also be deceived by the bad people with good-looking appearance. Obviously, it is very important to break the limitations of the traditional Chinese culture and eliminate its dress by means of correctly understanding and applying the Beijing Opera facial masks, and overcoming the value judgment that the good people look good and the bad people look ugly.

Keywords: Beijing Opera facial masks, Chinese traditional culture, Thinking pattern

Introduction

According to a German philosopher named Cassirer, art can be defined as a kind of symbolic language, or a symbol system, which is the structure and organization for the human experience. Cassirer also added that art is through grasping the appearance in the visible, touchable, and audible that give us the order (Cassirer, 1985). The difference between the artistic symbols and the everyday language symbols are not in their means, but also purpose, the former expresses the aesthetic feeling, the latter displays the concept.

The Beijing Opera facial masks discussed in this paper are artistic symbols which are widely known in China and have high international popularity. The masks in a broad sense, including the masks and false faces which is worn on the head in order to conceal true colours and according to the actor’s role. The greasepaint is directly painted on the actor’s face in the Beijing opera. In Japan, it has the Noh (director Akira Kurosawa must apply this in his film works) and in China, it has the Beijing Opera. Masks were used very widely in both. In Hegel’s “aesthetics”, when he said about “the act or art”, he wrote: “it is worth noting in this respect that the Greeks are without facial expression, because all the Greek actors wear masks” (Hegel, 1998, 42). Thus, it can be seen that the masks in the performing art is a very important prop. Thus, the Chinese develops the function of the mask to the extreme, and it becomes the quintessence art of China.



Chinese Beijing Opera

Beijing Opera is the symbol of Chinese traditional culture (Weigeng, 1992). The culture of Chinese Opera has a long history. From the music and dance in the Han Dynasty two thousand years ago to the Liyuan hundred Operas of the Tang Dynasty, further to the Southern Opera in the Song Dynasty, and the Kunqu Opera in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. All of which provided sufficient nourishment for the formation of Beijing Opera. The formation process of Beijing Opera is also the process of Beijing Opera's high integration in Chinese traditional culture. Beijing Opera has not only inherited the essence of ancient Operas, but also integrates the artistic elements and characteristics of many ancient Operas such as Qinqiang and Han Opera on the basis of Hui Opera. Therefore, although Beijing Opera only has a history of more than one hundred years, its spiritual core is two thousand years of Chinese culture (Lun, 2016). In addition, the art of Beijing Opera is in harmony with the classical arts such as poetry, calligraphy, painting and the aesthetic taste of the Chinese people. For example, the simple beauty of Beijing Opera can echo with the art of calligraphy and traditional Chinese painting. The characteristics of the comparisons and symbolic in Beijing Opera are also commonly used in the rhetoric techniques of the classical literature; the rhythm in Beijing Opera singing is consistent with the rhythm of ancient poetry; even the costumes of Beijing Opera are the result of integrating the characteristics of different periods of Tang, Song, Ming and Qing to beautify it (Li Lun, 2016). Therefore, Beijing Opera is not only a kind of opera, it is also an encyclopedia of Chinese civilization.

In China, Beijing Opera is called "National Opera", it is one of the symbols of traditional Chinese culture (Weigeng, 1992). The Beijing Opera facial mask is an important element of Beijing Opera and the first way for people to understand and appreciate this opera. It was born with a deep imprint of traditional Chinese culture. At the same time, before the production of visual art forms such as movies and television and during the relatively scarce period, it also became a booster and amplifier to spread the traditional Chinese culture with its unique charm and unparalleled influence. While promoting the essence, it also distributes the dross. Obviously, it is very necessary to inherit the essence of Chinese culture and remove its dross.

However, several questions have arisen based on the above statements. What role does the Beijing Opera facial mask play in rendering the charm of Beijing Opera and inheriting the traditional Chinese culture, its spread and contribution to the traditional Chinese culture? Furthermore, what are the advantages and disadvantages of the Chinese traditional culture to be reflected? All these are undoubtedly worthy of consideration and this study discusses this matter in-depth.

Methodology

This study is based on Chinese traditional culture to analyze the Beijing Opera facial masks. This paper studies the Beijing Opera facial masks' meaning, evolution process, real-life application, and cultural communication. In order to discuss in-depth, the research adopts the qualitative analysis method to analyze the books and articles of authors such as Fu Xuebin, Cheng Ningyu, Wang Hai and Liang Jiu.

Xuebin (2009) has defined the facial masks by collecting and copying it: "Using bright and gorgeous colors and sharp and smooth lines to form the facial patterns, which are drawn on the faces of Chinese opera characters. It is a special means of Chinese opera makeup that becomes the facial masks" (Xuebin, 2009, 63). He pointed out that this uniqueness of the facial art has made it a quintessential Chinese art that has been passed down from generation to generation and is still active on the stage nowadays. Jiu (2002) has proposed his opinion by the way of examples: "there is more than one way to spread design culture, but the key lies in harmony" (Jiu, 2002, 18). Art originates from life and is higher than life. The application of art in life needs to adapt to the surrounding environment to make continuous changes. This paper has proposed the changes of art in real life from the perspective of cultural communication.

Ningyu (2004) has proposed that "In the view of the Beijing Opera artists, due to the natural characteristics of human beings are not enough to show human character and personality, in order to



meet the practical and aesthetic requirements, the artists have to exaggerate the characters' characteristics and ignore irrelevant details when designing facial makeup for Chinese opera character, so as to show the characters' personalities" (Ningyu, 2004, 137). Hai (2018) put forward "The stylized characteristics of Beijing Opera facial masks are mainly reflected by its original meaning and extended meaning. The cultural connotation reflected by it is not only the combination of the long-term development of Chinese culture and the self-evolution of Beijing Opera art, but also the result of the continuous deposition of the cultural connotation given by Beijing Opera performers" (Hai, 2018, 63). From two aspects of phenomenon and literature representation, the two authors put forward that stage art is performed by exaggerating and amplifying the details of life, the characteristics of the characters on the stage are often a synthesis of multiple roles in life, the purpose is to let the audience understand the creator's intention in limited time and space.

That is to say, Beijing Opera facial masks are the results of art, exaggeration, and intuition in real life. It is a tool to express the creator's intentions, a bridge to arouse the audience's emotional resonance, an engine for the inheritance and development of Beijing Opera art. However, nowadays, more and more people have incorporated the "essence determines appearance" of Beijing Opera facial masks into their real life and make a lot of mistakes. Thus, this paper will analyze from the aspect of the change of stage art in real life.

Findings

Mr. Fu Baoshi, who be known as "the soul of Chinese painting", has a famous Chinese painting called "The Beauty Walk" and Mr. Xu Beihong used to call this painting as "The grand symphony of sound, color, soul and flesh". It is said that once when Mr. Fu Baoshi animatedly introduced his painting experience to his friends, specifically pointed at the most prominent official among the officials in the painting and said: "This is Yang Guozhong, when I shaped his image, I focused on his personality traits. Look, his eyebrows show treacherous arrogance appearance" (Ningyu, 2004, 37). From the words of Mr. Fu Baoshi, we found that in reality people have various different masks and they become an unconscious habit in people's lives. Even like Mr. Fu Baoshi, a great artist, has integrated this thought into his own conversations and works inadvertently. Although it cannot be said that this thinking mode of Mr. Fu Baoshi is originated from the Beijing Opera facial masks, at least it can be said that it fully complies with the values represented by Beijing Opera facial masks. Beijing Opera facial masks essentially was the artistic symbols which express the faithful, treacherous, kindness and evil of the dramatic characters on stage, but nowadays, it has inadvertently become a yardstick for judging people's good or bad characteristics in real life. Using the method of the Opera masks to cognize others is the dissimilation of the Beijing Opera facial masks, and this kind of dissimilation is probably unexpected by the Beijing Opera artists.

Dissimilation of Beijing Opera Facial Masks

As one of the symbols of traditional Chinese culture, Beijing Opera was deeply imprinted with traditional Chinese culture when it was born. This is the birthmark that it cannot erase with its unique symbol. It uses masks to inherit the traditional Chinese culture and uses external forms to express the inner world of the characters.

In Beijing Opera, using Beijing Opera facial masks to express the character's good, evil and loyalty, it is not a unique phenomenon in Chinese traditional culture. Before the birth of Beijing Opera, in Chinese literature and art, it is very common to use people's looks to express the character and morals. The fiction is not visual art, it can avoid to describe the person's appearance and bodily form, but the author in order to show the characters' personality and moral character, they still use a lot of text to describe the main characters. In literature works "Three kingdoms", which was written in the late Yuan Dynasty and early Ming Dynasty, the author uses many wonderful words to describe the positive characters. For example, Zhang fei, "He is eight feet high, leopard's head and big ring eyes, good looks and masculinity, the sound as big thunder, the action like a galloping horse" (Mei, 2018, 35), Guan yu, "He is nine feet high, beard is two feet long, the face color is the same as the dark color of jujube, lips





seem rouged, with beautiful eyes and eyebrow, looks handsome and majestic” (Xiuyun, 2011, 14). The majestic images of the two generals are presented in the paper, after reading these descriptions, the readers can know they are heroes. However, the author describes Zhuge Liang like this, “He is eight feet high, with a face like a crown jade, wearing a head scarf and temperament like fairy” (Ruoyi, 2017, 103). Obviously, using people’s appearance to distinguish good people from bad people is a prominent feature of traditional Chinese culture. In philosophy, this extreme judging method is manifested as content depends on form, that is, what we usually call “State outside is based on mind inside”. The good people must be kind of good-looking, the bad people must be fangs and grin, fierce and evil. The appearance has become a ruler for identifying good and bad people. Beijing Opera facial masks take this to the extreme.

The basic colors of Beijing Opera facial masks are red, purple, black, white, blue, green, yellow, pink, grey, silver and gold. Originally, the color is just used to render and emphasize the characters’ original skin color. Later it is endowed with various symbolic significance (Lun, 2016). The red expresses loyal and brave, the black facial masks expresses strong, honest, brave, cursoriness, and even reckless, The yellow facial masks expresses tough, insidious, and vicious brutality. The blue or green facial masks in operas express the figures with the strong and brave, bold, and unconstrained, unruly characters. The white facial masks generally symbolize an insidious bad person. In addition to color, the Beijing Opera facial masks art also use the shape of one’s face, facial features, and other surface features to represent the nature and the inner world of the drama characters.

Interestingly, according to the historical records, Bao Cheng was a scholar and he was a naturally white face. However, white face in Beijing Opera implied meaning is insidious which is not consistent with his honest and upright character. Therefore, it violates the representation meaning of visual symbol system of Beijing Opera facial masks. Thereupon, in the Beijing Opera, the face of Bao Cheng is painted black, showing strength and integrity. “A white crescent moon is drawn on his forehead to signify that he has miraculous powers during the day to take charge of the justice in the world and the night to judge right and wrong in the other world, to let him get impartial appearance, make his inner character and outer form to achieve highly consistent and harmonious” (Weigeng, 1992, 112).

From this phenomenon, it can be seen that the Beijing Opera facial masks can let the viewers see the character is good or evil briefly. The people such as Baogong, Guan Yunchang, when they appear on the stage, the audiences at once know that they are good persons, but the people like Gaoqiu, Dongzhuo, the audiences immediately know that they are bad guys with a lot of evil. This cultural core of the visual symbols is not allowed that the personality phenomenon of internal and external contradictions is existed. It is considered that the kind of character a person has must have a corresponding appearance (Beijing Opera facial masks) and vice versa. Through this special visual symbol of Beijing Opera masks, the viewer can judge the loyalty, goodness and evil of the characters behind the Beijing Opera masks. Owing to the public perception, people naturally generate this kind of psychology: who looks good must be a good person, who looks fierce must be a bad person, which is what we often said: “judge people by their appearance”, and this concept seems to become the most basic and easiest way for people to judge the good or bad of another person.

Limitations of Chinese Traditional Culture

“Culture is a complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, law, ethics, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Tylor, 1871). As the most influential visual arts in China, Beijing Opera cannot remove the brand of traditional Chinese culture, and at the same time, it has become the best carrier for the development and spread of traditional Chinese culture. The function of representing characters’ features with Beijing Opera facial masks, not only reflect but also strengthens the characteristics of identifying good and bad people with their appearance in traditional Chinese culture.

From the general sense, whether to wear the masks for the performance of the song and dance drama, or to attend the make-up party, the real purpose that people wear the masks is to hide their





identity. From the external masks to get ability that their own do not have, but has been to desire, fully release oneself, not subject to any restrictions.

However, the masks in Beijing Opera is not for relaxing, entertaining, and to hide intrinsic true feelings. Perhaps at the beginning, the masks of Beijing Opera is just to emphasize the stage effect, but along with the character's face makeup, it gradually becomes a kind of fixed pattern, and when it turns into the visual communication symbol system to help the audience identify loyal and traitor, good and evil, the masks art will take the characters as the carrier through curing for the self-explanatory visual symbol to disseminate the morals and values of Chinese traditional culture to the audience.

The masks art developments so far and has become the quintessence of Chinese culture, this means that we must not only see from the point of view of pure art to appreciate the performance form, but it should also be from the height of the culture to deeply analysis the causes. Culture is invisible, intangible, it is abstract, however, culture is also formed by the tangible things that can be seen and touched. Beijing Opera facial masks with its tangible visual symbols tend to reflect and spread the essence of Chinese traditional culture.

In Beijing Opera artists view, the physical features of the people is not enough to show character and personality, so in order to meet the requirements of practical and aesthetic, when the artists design the masks for the Chinese opera characters, the characteristics of the characters must be exaggerated to ignore irrelevant details and in this way to show the character's personality. Against the background of the fixed visual symbol system, the mask is not just to show the physical and physiological characteristics of the characters, more importantly it can also show the social characteristics of the characters.

Conclusion

Beijing Opera facial masks are one of the manifestations of Chinese Beijing opera art. Its development gradually has formed a set of systematic visual symbols and become one of the Chinese traditional culture. At first, the appearance of the opera masks is only to entertain the public, but now we regard it as the shackle of our lives, give own dominance right to the opera masks, and it has formed the alienation phenomena of the major and minor upside down. The Beijing Opera facial masks and its philosophical idea that the appearance is born of the heart can cause problems in many ways.

Firstly, it causes people to live with the masks intentionally or unintentionally. In order to get the trust of the leaders and the approval of colleagues, some people usually wear the masks to meet others, no matter meet who, always with a smile. For example, for leaders, full of fake smile and flattery, for coworkers and subordinates who cannot help themselves, full of proud. The masks have become a tool for these people to gain their selfish desires, and its original essence has been completely alienated. The masks are originally a prop for entertaining others, but now, it has changed its essence in the long-term development.

Secondly, it makes the society excessively aspire after the same outside and inside. In Chinese traditional culture, it emphasizes the same outside and inside, which is the quintessence, but it is wrong to pursue too much of the surface, or even simply use it as a yardstick for judging good or bad. Usually, we consider the people who look good are good people, and inadvertently, we use this thought as a criterion for judging a person's good or bad, while punishing the wicked person, we neglect of the truth that, sincerity, kindness and beauty exist in many people's ugly appearance. Indeed, perfection of inside and outside is what we expect, and to aspire perfection is the ideal for many people, who believe that perfection can sublimate their own value, but too much pursuit of perfection will hinder one's vision and make own mind become narrow and limited. Even more frightening, the pursuit of the absolute unity of inside and outside, while training hypocrites, often makes people judge a person is good or bad by its appearance, only respecting Luo shirts but not respecting people, it makes the ordinary people, while watching out villains, ignore or even discriminate against those good persons with the ugly appearance like Wu Dalang and Zhong Kui. This can hurt some of the good persons.





Finally, it reinforces the idea of either black or white. The thinking mode that is either black or white, either good or bad, is unable to understand and handle complex interpersonal relationships and social phenomena at all, and often intensify contradictions and lose their rationality. This concept makes people narrow-minded, without generosity, without tolerance and forgiveness. No matter what happens, if the truth is on own side, they will not give the other party the opportunity to correct, but completely defeat the other party, and absolutely no forgiveness for those who have made mistakes.

Therefore, the final argument of this article is to conclude that the opera facial masks, while artistically and intuitively expresses the character characteristics and moral and ethical characteristics of stage characters, it also represents the value orientation of personality judgment in traditional Chinese culture, that is, the thinking patterns of “either good or evil”, “good people have kind faces”, “bad people have ugly faces”, and “essence determines appearance”. Using these thinking patterns can make a lot of mistakes in real life. Beijing Opera facial masks can not only delight people artistically, but also inadvertently provides evidence for people to know others by using this manner. Through correctly understanding and applying the Beijing Opera facial masks, avoiding to evaluate one’s good or bad by appearance, overcoming the value judgments that good people look good and bad people look ugly, all of these are very important to break the limitations of traditional Chinese culture and eliminate its dross.

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