**A Study of National Identity Construction in Mei Lanfang’s Opera Dance from a Cross-cultural Perspective**

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Chinese opera dance is a dance-based manifestation of a combination of stylized body movements in opera performance. It had been the main form of performance for Chinese dance since the Ming and Qing dynasties, and provided important references for the construction of aesthetics of modern Chinese dance. Mei Lanfang, a representative figure of opera dance in the 20th century, managed to sufficiently manifest the national aesthetic quality of opera dance from an foreign perspective during his visits to Japan, America and the Soviet Union. This is also the focus of this paper. As such, exploring Mei’s opera dance and his stage performance from a cross-cultural perspective is of great theoretical and practical significance as it helps to deeply interpret the construction of the national identity and modernity of opera dance. With that in mind, this paper is mainly divided into four sections:

**Ⅰ. The formation of the cross-cultural perspective in Mei’s oepra dance**

In the early period of the Republic of China, Mei indirectly accepted the influences of western thoughts from modern intellectuals who had received western education like Qi Rushan, Li Shikan and Wu Zhenxiu. This prompted the emergence of distinct foreign elements and characteristics in the choreography, expression and clothing design of his opera dance, giving rise to a cross-cultural aesthetic perspective and the transformation of his opera dance towards elegance, as well as the pursuit of psychological experience in a real-world context on the basis of “fathoming”.

**Ⅱ. The sympathetic understanding concerning the aesthetic image of Mei’s opera dance during his performances in Japan**

Mei visited Japan twice in 1919 and 1924. In his early exploration of the cross-cultural field, he showcased images in Chinese opera dance initially imbued with modern aesthetic quality through ancient costume opera dance like *A Fairy Maiden Scatters Flowers* (*Tiannv Sanhua*), *Mr. Lian Jinfeng* and *Stealing the Precious Box* (*Hongxian Daohe*), gaining sympathetic understanding from the Japanese audience. Mei choreographed ancient costume opera dance with the original intention to revive traditional classic dance. For that purpose, he devoted a considerably large proportion of dance to operas like *A Fairy Maiden Scatters Flowers*, which gained extremely high praise from the Japanese audience who regarded such works as “Mei dance”. In addition, the “expression” capability that Mei Lanfang paid much attention to and practiced, also became a focus of Japanese critics, who considered such exquisite and realistic expressive techniques as Mei’s new expression approach to breaking through the traditional paradigm and catering to modern humanity and psychological needs.

**Ⅲ. Emphasis on the cultural identity of opera dance during Mei’s visit to the U.S.**

In 1930, Mei visited the U.S. To cater to the aesthetic interests of the foreign audience, Mei highlighted the “dancing property” of opera in terms of text and image-based publicity for cross-cultural communication purposes instead of “dramaticism” of the stories in ancient costume opera dance performances; he also removed a large proportion of songs to ensure the purity of dance performances. The combined effect of various factors left the circle of American critics with a deep impression of Mei’s dance performance, earning him the title of “the dancer” as the cultural spokesperson of classic Chinese dance. For example, William Bolitho, a critic, said, “for me, Mei Lanfang is first and foremost a dancer, and I wouldn’t hesitate to include him as one of the most accomplished dancers...when watching his sword dance in the *Stealing the Precious Box*, I consciously realized that he had reached the highest realm in dance”. (Mei Shaowu: *Comments on Beijing Opera and Mei Lanfang in the International Circle of Literature and Art*, Chinese Theater, 3rd Issue, 1992)

**Ⅳ. Proof of national aesthetic quality in Mei’s opera dance during his visit to the Soviet Union**

In 1935, Mei gave performances during his visit to the Soviet Union, creating a strong resonance from theatrical directors and theorists from the Soviet Union and Germany concerning his opera dance and expressive techniques. Vsevolod Meyerhold, a famous director in the Soviet Union, pointed out “fiction” was the essential characteristic of all theaters including the Chines ones. Taking Mei’s *The Fisherman’s Revenge* (*Da Yu Sha Jia*) as an example, he argued that the performer “gave a vivid and lively performance of life on water only by using a paddle”. To achieve this, the fundamental technique was actually virtuality. Fiction is arguably another interpretation of the virtual technique of opera dance. It is amid the integration and mutual proof of Chinese and western performance theories that the national identity of opera dance was confirmed.

**Conclusions: The aesthetic value of national identity construction in Mei’s opera dance**

Mei’s opera dance took on a new look in cross-cultural interactions in overseas performances, which was of a pioneering significance. Mei successfully exhibited the aesthetic expressiveness and cultural properties of opera dance, making the foreign audience recognize the artistic achievements and aesthetic value of traditional Chinese dance. From the modern evolution of traditional Chinese art, it can be seen that Mei successfully established the aesthetic patterns of Chinese opera and dance under the care of the others amid the cross-cultural communication of his opera dance, creating a conceptual and practical pillar for the formal construction of contemporary Chinese classic dance and extending the physical construct of the national identity of Chinese dance through its intrinsically generated approach.

References

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