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**| RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**A Comparative Study of Aesthetics Between Ancient Greek Drama and Traditional Eastern Theatre**

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**| ABSTRACT**

Ancient Greek drama and traditional Chinese opera mark respectively their supreme achievements of Western and Eastern civilizations in theatrical field. The paper conducts comparative research on their aesthetic discrepancies from three dimensions: philosophical origins, dramatic narration and theatrical aesthetics. In respect of philosophical origin, ancient Greek drama is rooted in the tradition of rationalism and conception of destiny, highlighting the conflict between individual will and inevitable fate; traditional Eastern opera, shaped by ethical edification of Confucianism and Taoist notion of unity between human and nature, prioritizes maintenance of ethical order and moderation of emotion. In terms of dramatic narration, the ancient Greek drama centers on rigorous structural principle of "Three Unities" and drastic external conflicts while evokes intense pity and fear through devices such as "Peripeteia" and "Anagnorisis"; traditional Eastern opera adopts the "point-line" narrative mode with stress on Xieyi (ideographic) expression of inner emotion and karmic moral framework. From the angle of theatrical aesthetics, ancient Greek drama pursues solemn and stunning effects from plaza performance where masked actor and chorus undertake multiple roles. Traditional Eastern opera takes virtuality, stylization and xieyi as its aesthetic core and realizes performance by "Four Skills and Five Methods". Research affirms the creative fusion of theatrical aesthetics between East and West by Chinese and Japanese artists and the unique value of intercultural adaptations as a medium for mutual learning between civilizations.

**| KEYWORDS**

Ancient Greek drama; Traditional Eastern opera; aesthetics; Intercultural theatre

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**1. Introduction**

**1.1 Research Background and Significance**

Ancient Greek drama is the source of Western theatre. Originated from Athens in 6th century BCE as sacrificial ritual dedicated to Dionysus (the god of wine), ancient Greek drama incorporates diverse forms of art, including poetry, music and dance, it's recognized as the earliest "Gesamtkunstwerk" (general artwork). Its evolution and prosperity are closely intertwined with geographical, political and economic conditions of ancient Greece. It greatly promoted the formation and dissemination of classical paradigm of Western theatrical art. Since the introduction of ancient Greek drama to the East in early 20th century, a multitude of adaptations of ancient Greek drama emerged as a result of translation, transplantation and domestication by different nations. These intercultural adaptations transcend simple linguistic conversion. They exhibited different understandings and aesthetic expressions of different civilizations on the theme of human's shared fate.

As the quintessential representative of Eastern theatre, traditional Chinese opera boasts more than a millennium of history. Founded upon the song-and-dance performance in temple fairs and acrobatics, it's mainly characterized by comprehensive performance that "narrates stories through singing and dancing". It's grounded in the aesthetic principles of virtuality, symbolism and xieyi, forming a distinctive Eastern theatrical system. Separated by Eurasian continent, Chinese opera and ancient Greek drama followed their historical trajectories and remained isolated from one another. It wasn't until the global prevalence of "intercultural theatre" that the theatrical arts bred by the two ancient civilizations finally achieved historical transformation.

Intercultural comparative research on theatrical art between Eastern and Western civilizations bears multi-dimensional significance. On the theoretical level, the research deepens the understanding of essential aesthetic discrepancies between Western and Eastern drama. It seeks to go beyond previous studies confined to intra-cultural system and constructs an integrated framework for comparative aesthetic studies from philosophical ideology, narrative structure and on-stage practice. On the level of actual practice, the paper provides theoretical references for contemporary intercultural dramatic adaptations by promoting in-depth dialogue between different civilizations. From the perspective of mutual learning, the integration of the two dramatic traditions ought to feature "fusion", as Luo Jinlin stated, "it's like coffee blended with milk, each contains elements of the other". Only by doing so can we continue to create diversified theatrical work through communication.

## 1.2 Research Purpose and Methodology

The paper targets the ancient Greek tragedy Medea, revenge-themed traditional Chinese operas as well as intercultural adaptations of Medea by modern and contemporary Chinese/Japanese artists. It attempts to conduct comparative analysis systematically on the core difference between West-East cultural and ideological systems from philosophical origins, dramatic narration and theatrical aesthetics.

This study adopts three research methods: intercultural comparative analysis, textual analysis and case study: first, a comparative analysis established on the three dimensions, second, a textual analysis centering on ancient Greek tragedy Medea and reliable traditional Chinese opera, last, a case study involving director Luo Jinlin's Hebei Bangzi adaptation of Medea and Tadashi Suzuki's dramatic adaptations. It aims to explore specific strategies of aesthetic integration in modern intercultural theatrical rewriting.

## 2. Literature Review

In domestic and international academia, there is abundant amount of comparative research about ancient Greek drama and traditional Eastern opera. It can be roughly categorized in four aspects.

First, the study of ancient Greek theatrical philosophy and aesthetics (Aristotle, 1962; Plato, 1959; Nietzsche, 2017; Jung, 2020; Ye Meng, 2018; Wei Fenglian, 2004). In his work *Poetics* (1962), Aristotle elaborated his theory on tragedy for the first time, defining it as "a mimesis (imitation) of an action that is serious, complete and of a certain magnitude". It aims to excite "pity or fear" so as to achieve "catharsis" (purgation) among audience. The theory laid the cornerstone of Western tragic aesthetics. Nietzsche proposed the dual aesthetic categories of "Apollonian Spirit" and "Dionysian Spirit" in his monograph *The Birth of Tragedy*. The former symbolizes reason, order and plastic art, while the latter connotes instinct, revelry and music art. He deemed Greek tragedy born in the dynamic equilibrium between the two primitive impulses. From the angle of collective conscious, Jung pointed out "archetype" —universal psychological experiences accumulated by generations of people—told in ancient Greek tragedy is accountable for triggering trans-temporal and cross-spatial resonance.

Second, comparative research on ancient Greek and Eastern theatre (Chen Rongnü, 2018 & 2023; Luo Jinlin, 2016; Zhao Yanfeng, 2024; Zhao Yanfeng, 2024; Chen Xiujuan, 2024; Luo Tong, 2020). Research on the Intercultural Theatrical Practice of Ancient Greek Tragedy in China by Chen Rongnü is the most systematic academic monograph in recent years. Focusing on the intercultural adaptation of ancient Greek tragedy to Chinese opera starting from 1980s, 射 analyses integrated mechanisms of narrative structure, performing techniques and cultural connotations in representative adapted works, including Hebei Bangzi Medea and Thebes, Peking Opera King Oedipus and Ping Opera The City's Vengeance and Hatred. It further constructs a theoretical model of "three-layer coding transformation" and a multi-dimensional communication paradigm of "translation–adaptation–performance–dissemination". Chen Xiujuan (2024) noted that Chen Rongnü's work fills the academic gap of ancient Greek tragic adaptation. Zhao Yanfeng (2024) systematized the cross-cultural interpretation of Greek tragedies by modern Japanese dramatists such as Tadashi Suzuki and Yukio Ninagawa in Japan's *Compilation and Performance of Ancient Greek*

Dramas, providing crucial references for East Asian cross-cultural theatre research from the dimensions of onryo (vengeful ghost) aesthetics and Noh theatrical body language.

Third, comparison on the functions of theatrical elements (Wang Li, 2024; Xue Xiaojin, 2003; Shi Yuyun, 2015; Song Zhihui, 2011). By analyzing specific artistic components in her work *A Comparative Study on the Functions of "Chorus" in Ancient Greek Tragedy and "Vocal Accompaniment" in Chinese Traditional Opera*, Wang Li (2024) verified their overlapping roles in lyrical expression, narrative progression and aesthetic interaction with audiences. Xue Xiaojin (2003) argued that theatrical devices in traditional Chinese opera, such as bangqiang (offstage vocal accompaniment) in Sichuan Opera, longtao (utility walk-on roles) and jianchang (stage attendant) in Peking Opera, share functional similarity with the chorus of ancient Greek drama in *Capturing the Artistic Essence of Ancient Greek Tragedy with Chinese Traditional Opera: A Review of Hebei Bangzi Medea*.

Fourth, comparison on different types of tragedy and aesthetic ideology (Sun Huizhu, 2018; Lin Weisheng, 2011 & 2012; Huang Kejian, 2004; Yang Hui, 2010; Li Ying, 2010; Gao Jianwei, 2018; Luo Jinlin, 2016). Sun Huizhu (2018) proposed to differentiate "the theatre of purgation" and "the theatre of cultivation" in *The Theatre of Purgation and the Theatre of Cultivation: as Related to the Complex Definitions and Ramifications of Theatre, Drama, Chinese Opera in the Context of Chinese and Western Cultures*. He contended drama tradition originated from ancient Greece prefers to demonstrate the catharsis and purgation of evil, whereas Chinese opera favors the promotion of virtuous deeds to cultivate the temperament. In *Comparative Analysis between Medea in the West and "Abandoned Wife" and "Infanticide" in Chinese Literature*, Yang Hui (2010) systematically compared the narrative discrepancies between the West and China on the same theme. Li Ying (2003), in *A Comparative Study in the Western Tragedy "Medea" and the Chinese "Chao's Orphan"*, provided an in-depth analysis of the character images, tragic conflict and cultural connotations of the two works. Luo Jinlin, who had been directing movie for more than three decades, suggested "imagery theatre conception" that blends Chinese and ancient Greek drama in *Some Thoughts Based on the Experience of Directing Ancient Greek Plays*. Moreover, some scholars have adopted a civilizational history perspective, using the "sad ending" of Greek tragedy as a point of comparison to explore the causes of the "happy ending" phenomenon in Chinese tragedy under the interplay of agricultural and nomadic civilizations. Other scholars compare Chinese and Greek tragedies from a "thematic reading" perspective, arguing that the theme of Chinese tragedy is "subjugation by man" within "conflicts between humans", whereas Greek tragedy stresses "conflict between humans and nature". Gao Jianwei (2018), in *On Discrepancies of Expression Means Between Chinese and Western Tragedies—Comparison Between Antigone and Doue Yuan*, provides a detailed analysis of characterization, plot structures and expressive methods.

Despite fruitful outcome, there are still gaps to be addressed on the whole level. First, current comparative studies are mostly confined to single dimension or isolated cases on the level of narration, or lack comprehensive investigation spanning from philosophical origins to narrative structure and then to theatrical aesthetics. Second, the research of cross-cultural adaptations predominantly focuses on Chinese adaptation. Other East Asian countries like Japan and South Korea are absent, resulting in lack of transregional comparative perspective. Finally, the integration of dramatic theories and comparative literature methodologies remains inadequate, with most studies confined to superficial phenomenal description rather than in-depth theoretical interpretation. Against such research backdrop, this paper implements systematic comparison of aesthetic disparities between ancient Greek drama and traditional Eastern theatre from the three fundamental dimensions and incorporates case analysis of Sino-Japanese intercultural adaptations, aiming to advance relevant research in systematicity and transregional vision.

### **3 Comparison of Philosophical Origins**

#### **3.1 Philosophical Origins of Ancient Greek Drama**

The emergence and prosperity of ancient Greek drama are deeply rooted in Western rationalist philosophy and the democratic politics of the polis (city-state). Ancient Greek philosophy initiated sustained exploration into the origin of the world, from Thales' assertion that "water is the primary principle of all things" to Plato's Theory of Forms and Aristotle's metaphysics, all indicating the spirit of rational inquiry. Such rationalism permeated ancient Greek tragedy and rendered it not merely an outlet for emotion, but a rational reflection on the relationships between humanity and fate, deities and the polis.

The conception of fate in ancient Greek tragedy underwent profound evolution from Aeschylus to Euripides. In Aeschylus' works, fate is depicted as an omnipotent and mysterious force that even divine forces couldn't defy. It was exemplified by the protagonist's unyielding resistance against destiny in *Prometheus Bound*. Sophocles inherited this view of fate: although Oedipus strove to evade the divine oracle, he failed to escape his doom, yet his valor to confront fate remained glorified. The conception of fate underwent a fundamental transformation in the works of Euripides, who questioned the immutability of divine

oracle and destiny, and emphasized individual choice and action as the decisive factors of personal fate. In *Medea*, confronted by her husband's betrayal and the oppression of the patriarchal society, *Medea* ceased to submit to her fate but launched thorough rebellion through infanticide as vengeance, posing a direct challenge to traditional fatalism.

Aristotle defined tragedy in *Poetics* as "a mimesis of an action that is serious, complete and of a certain magnitude", and argued that tragedy enables the catharsis of audiences' emotions by exciting pity and fear. This theory prioritizes dramatic action and its affective effects, establishing the fundamental principles of Western tragic aesthetics. Nietzsche revealed the essence of tragedy through the binary opposition of Apollonian and Dionysian spirits. As the origin of plastic art and epic poetry, the Apollonian represents rationality, order and formal harmony, while the Dionysian symbolizes instinct, revelry and primal impulses, underlying musical art. He argued that Greek tragedy arose from the dynamic equilibrium of these two forces, with the ecstatic chorus of Dionysus constituting the primitive core of tragedy while the personified mirage of Apollo shaping the distinct imageries of tragic heroes. From the perspective of collective unconscious, Jung explained the universal value of ancient Greek tragedies. He held the archetypal images audience perceived, including tragic heroes, wise old man and scapegoats went beyond personal stories but dramatic realization of shared psychological memories accumulated across human history.

### 3.2 Philosophical Origins of Traditional Eastern Theatre

In sharp contrast to the rationalist tradition of ancient Greek drama, traditional Eastern theatre, represented by Chinese opera, is under dual influence of Confucian ethical edification and the Taoist philosophy of the unity of human and nature.

Confucian conceptions of artistic functions profoundly shaped the aesthetic orientation of traditional Chinese opera. Confucius proposed that *The Book of Songs* served four core functions: *xing* (inspiration), *guan* (social observation), *qun* (social harmony) and *yuan* (remonstrance), endowing literature and art with the power to inspire aspiration, reflect social customs, unify communities and criticize social malpractices. In Preface to the *Book of Songs*, Confucian literary ideology advocates moral education through art, with the tenet of "regulating marital relations, consolidating filial piety, optimizing human ethics, enhancing moral cultivation and reforming social customs", establishing the long-standing Chinese tradition of literature conveying moral principles. In this ideological framework, the primary purpose of traditional Chinese opera, especially tragic works, lies not in achieving emotional purgation through the depiction of individual conflict with fate, but in moral edification by advocating core ethical virtues such as loyalty, filial piety, chastity and righteousness. Chinese tragedies are more accurately defined as sentimental dramas, whose core functions focus on moral instruction and social remediation. The sufferings of female characters are designed to highlight traditional virtues including filial piety and chastity, and to consolidate the notion of karmic retribution through "ultimately served justice". Consequently, the expression of individual emotions in traditional Chinese opera is subordinated to overarching ethical norms. Radical vengeance utterly driven by personal passion such as *Medea's* infanticide is hardly tolerable with the ethical logic of traditional Chinese theatre.

Taoist philosophy is another spiritual source for traditional Chinese opera. The notion of unity of human and nature advocates harmonious integration between human, nature and the cosmic order. Aesthetically, it emphasizes *yijing* (artistic conception) and *shenyun* (romantic charm) beyond realistic representation, highlighting the interplay of virtuality and reality and the transcendence of literal form for inner meaning. Taoist aesthetics profoundly shaped the imagery-oriented characteristics of Chinese opera. Unlike Western drama's direct imitation of reality, Taoism advocated expressing characters' inner emotions and mental states through highly abstract and formulaic performance. Furthermore, after its entry to China, Buddhism integrated the conception of karma into folk ethics and artistic creation, further consolidating the narrative logic of karmic retribution in traditional Chinese opera. In *Dou E Yuan*, the three prophecies made by Dou E before her execution—blood staining white silk, snowfall in midsummer and three years of drought—vindicates her grievance. It is a canonical representative of karmic narrative in Chinese opera.

In summary, the philosophical connotation of ancient Greek drama can be condensed into the trinity of "reason–destiny–individual": exploring the relationship between humanity and fate through rational thinking, highlighting human subjective value via the struggle of individual will and realizing emotional sublimation through catharsis. The philosophical essence of traditional Eastern theatre is embodied in "ethics–cosmic unity–harmony": Confucian ethics as the narrative framework, the unity of human and nature as the aesthetic ideal and moral enlightenment as the core social function. The fundamental divergence between the two philosophical origins—Western emphasis on external confrontation between individuals and fate versus Eastern pursuit of internal reconciliation between individuals and ethics—directly leads to disparities in their dramatic narration and theatrical aesthetics.

## **4 Comparative Analysis of Dramatic Narrative**

### **4.1 Narrative Characteristics of Ancient Greek Drama**

Ancient Greek drama is celebrated for its rigorous narrative structure. In *Poetics*, Aristotle argues that tragedy should abide by the Three Unities: the unity of action, time and place. The structure of tragedy strictly adheres to a fixed sequence: prologue, parodos, episodion and exodos, completing a coherent and self-contained dramatic action within a confined time and space. Taking *Medea* as an example, the entire drama unfolds within a single day, with the setting invariably located before Medea's residence in Corinth. The entire plot—from Medea's discovery of her husband's betrayal and her revenge to her eventual filicide—are circumscribed within this spatial and temporal framework, creating intense dramatic tension.

In terms of narrative techniques, the core of ancient Greek tragedy lies in intense external conflict. Such conflict goes beyond plain opposition between good and evil, but between two justified yet opposing claims to justice. Instances include the clash between divine law and human law in *Antigone* and the dilemma between personal vengeance and maternal instinct in *Medea*. Aristotle highly affirmed the dramatic value of *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis*. *Peripeteia* denotes a sudden twist of plot, while *anagnorisis* refers to the protagonist's transition from ignorance to full awareness of their existential situation. In *Medea*, Jason initially intended to marry Creon's daughter to secure a promising future for himself and his sons, yet this fateful decision ultimately brought utter ruin to his family, constituting a quintessential tragic *peripeteia*.

In characterization, the protagonists of ancient Greek tragedy are conventionally of higher born and depicted to be endowed with noble lineage and eminent virtues. Nevertheless, they succumb to a *hamartia* (tragic flaw). The characterization of *Medea* transcends binary moral judgment. She is simultaneously portrayed as an irresponsible daughter who fled abroad, a forsaken wife deserted by her husband and a desperate mother who commits vengeful filicide. Her tragic essence resides not in moral righteousness, but in the irreconcilable contradictions between individual will and fate, as well as between emotion and reason. Her infanticide constitutes a solemn and complete dramatic action, designed to evoke the audience's sympathy for her plight and maximize moral reflection, rather than make a simplistic verdict on good and evil.

### **4.2 Narrative Characteristics of Traditional East Asian Theatre**

Traditional Chinese opera adopts a point-line integrated narrative mode, a stark contrast to the narration of the Three Unities in ancient Greek drama. The "point" signifies key acts and plots, while the "line" refers to the narrative clue that runs through the entire play. This structural design enables the plot to unfold freely across time and space. Divided into *zhe* (act-based units), scene transitions are realized through the virtual and stylized performance of actors. Unbound by the Western Three Unities, Chinese opera is capable of depicting the entire life trajectory of a character, including weal and woe, separations and reunions. Temporal and spatial shifts are accomplished solely through performers' movements and the audience's imagination. As an epitome of the feature, *Dou E* spans a lengthy story arc, covering Dou E's childhood trafficking, wrongful conviction in adulthood, posthumous visitation and the eventual redress of grievance by her father. The complete narrative is seamlessly achieved through smooth transitions between each *zhe*.

In narrative orientation, Chinese opera emphasizes individuals' suffering and endurance under the overwhelming pressure of social ethics. Its tragic power derives not from fierce confrontation between the individual and fate, but from the helpless struggle of virtuous protagonists in a dark society and their eventual exoneration. Qin Xiangling has to rely on the upright magistrate Bao Zheng to vindicate her grievance; Huo Xiaoyu, betrayed before her death, can only exact revenge as a vengeful ghost; after being unjustly executed, Dou E's innocence is manifested merely through supernatural omens—blood staining white silk, midsummer snowfall and three consecutive years of drought. Even her father initially reproves her posthumous plea for case reconsideration. Their resistance is confined not only by social darkness but also by the multilayered constraints of ethical norms. The tragedy of traditional Chinese opera lies in individual affliction and endurance under ethical suppression, thereby arousing audience's sympathy and reflection on social maladies, rather than directly challenging the existing social system.

In characterization, female figures in Chinese opera, especially those caught in misfortune, are primarily shaped to serve ethical and moral edification. Be it Zhao Wuniang who endured humiliation in *Pipa Ji* or the heart-moving Dou E in *Dou E*, their suffering is deliberately designed to advocate traditional virtues such as filial piety and chastity. Filicide is not scarce in traditional Chinese opera, yet such acts are mostly committed by male characters for the sake of loyalty, righteousness and ethical integrity. In *Chao's Orphan*, Cheng Ying sacrifices his own son to protect the orphan of a loyal minister. His deed is a noble sacrifice made to protect the child of a loyal minister and repay kindness. Notably, in the Yuan *zaju* *The Great Revenge of Chao's Orphan*, the image of Cheng Ying's wife is completely marginalized. The narrative glorifies a father's sacrifice of his son

for collective ethical righteousness, while ignoring the maternal and spousal perspective. Such female images only begin to regain visibility in modern Peking Opera and contemporary music and dance drama adaptations. Likewise, in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*: Xi Hou, Xi Hou kills her child to avenge her former husband's murder and deception, yet her conduct is still recognized within the ethical framework of a chaste and heroic woman. Within the narrative system of Chinese opera, women's lives and maternal bonds are often sacrificed to uphold transcendent ethical principles—a fundamental divergence from Medea's revenge driven purely by individual free will.

### 4.3 Summary

Ancient Greek drama presents irreconcilable and intense conflicts between humanity and fate within a compact dramatic structure. It produces powerful tragic effects via *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis* and affirms subject value of human by exhibiting the individual perseverance in confronting destiny. Traditional East Asian theatre, by contrast, tells weal and woe, separations and reunions of mundane world within the framework of social ethics through an expansive point-line narrative structure. It describes characters' inner emotional worlds through imagery-oriented expression and restores ethical order by the denouement of karmic retribution. The former takes conflict as primary motive for narration, while the latter adopts endurance and redress as its main story arc. This fundamental divergence traces to distinct philosophies of the two civilizations: Greek rational inquiry into the relationship between the individual and fate and Confucian moral concern for the relationship between the individual and ethical norms.

## 5 Comparative Analysis of Theatre Aesthetics

### 5.1 Theatre Aesthetics of Ancient Greek Drama

#### 5.1.1 Performance Aesthetics of Actors

Ancient Greek drama built its performance around two things: masks and the chorus. Actors wore stylized masks that amplified facial expression and by swapping masks, a single actor could play several roles in one play. The mask hid who the actor was as a person and pushed the character toward something more than individual—an archetype. It also solved a practical problem: in amphitheatres seating tens of thousands, masks helped project voice and expression to spectators at the back.

Greek drama also kept the number of actors severely limited. It started with just one performer, then Aeschylus added a second and Sophocles a third. Each addition opened up richer dialogue and sharper conflict, but the performing style stayed spare—emotion came through language and gesture, not stage business. This austerity has roots in the ecstatic rites of Dionysus. The actor was expected to shed his own identity and merge with the role, sharing something of the rapturous abandon of ritual participants.

The chorus—usually twelve to fifteen members with a leader—played multiple roles. It narrated offstage action, voiced lyric feeling, spoke for the audience in dialogue with the characters and gave shape to the community's shared values. Nietzsche argued that the chorus was a primitive core of tragedy. The Dionysian chorus's ecstatic songs were the substantial essence of tragedy; the hero and the dialogue were just Apollonian surface—beautiful, but illusion.

#### 5.1.2 Stage Audio-Visual Aesthetics

Ancient Greek dramas were staged in hillside amphitheatres. Capable of holding over ten thousand spectators, the theatre of Dionysus beneath the Athenian Acropolis is the most renowned. The theatre's architectural design took adequate account of acoustic effects, leveraging the natural mountain slope to realize efficient sound propagation and ensure actors' speech reach every audience clearly. Such huge performance space determines the simplicity and solemnity of Greek visual aesthetics. Stage scenery is extremely minimalist, generally consisting only of a *skene* (stage set) representing a palace or temple; dramatic atmosphere is constructed primarily through actors' recitation and chorus.

In terms of stage technology, ancient Greek theatres adopt mechanical devices such as the *mechane*, a crane-like apparatus for the *deus ex machina* effect, which lowers deity actors from above to intervene in. Such stage machinery enhances theatrical expressiveness and reflects Greek drama's persistent preoccupation with supernatural forces. Overall, the audio-visual aesthetics of ancient Greek drama are defined by simplicity, solemnity, sublimity and overwhelming spiritual impact.

### **5.1.3 Significance of Theatrical Performance**

Ancient Greek dramatic performance played a significant role in ancient Greek society. As a part of the polis Dionysia festival, theatrical activities were financially subsidized by the polis through the *theorika* (theoric fund) to encourage citizen participation and expand the audience base. Pre-performance rituals, including the libation ceremony of the ten generals, the display of tributes from Athenian allied polis and the coming-of-age ceremony for war martyrs' orphans, was arranged to consolidate polis institutions and reinforce civic obligations. The theatre thus evolved into a public space integrating politics, educational and religious function. There the theme of drama always resonated with the realistic concerns of the polis.

Aristotle proposed the aesthetic function of tragedy was to excite pity and fear and achieve emotional catharsis, which in turn liberated the audience from quotidian emotional disturbances and restored mental tranquility. Such purification operated on both individual psychological and collective social levels: by witnessing the fate of tragic heroes, polis citizens attained a sense of shared emotional identity. Nietzsche further argued that tragedy provides mankind with metaphysical consolation. In the Dionysian ecstasy, individuals embraced the destined perish of their lives and the indestructibility of universal life will, thereby acquiring an aesthetic experience over existential predicaments.

## **5.2 Theatre Aesthetics of Traditional East Asian Theatre**

### **5.2.1 Performance Aesthetics of Actors**

The performance aesthetics of traditional Chinese opera are realized by *si gong wu fa* (Four Skills and Five Methods). The Four Skills refer to *chang* (singing), *nian* (recitation), *zuo* (acting) and *da* (acrobatics); the Five Methods cover hand gestures, eye expression, body posture, stylized norms and footwork. Unlike the vocal-centered performance of ancient Greek drama, Chinese opera is a highly synthetic art that integrates vocal performance, spoken recitation, dance and martial arts. Performers undergo long-term rigorous training to master the complete system of stylized theatrical conventions. Opera performance is inherently formulaic, narrating stories through singing and dancing based on the Four Skills and Five Methods.

The *hangdang* (role-type system) is a hallmark of Chinese opera aesthetics. Performers are categorized into four role types: *sheng* (male roles), *dan* (female roles), *jing* (painted-face roles), *mo* (secondary male roles) and *chou* (clown roles). Each role type follows established conventions in performance, vocal features and costume. Such categorization does not eliminate individual characteristics; instead, it offers creative latitude within stylized norms. Outstanding performers craft distinctive personalized portrayals through nuanced performance while complying to role-type regulations. This differs fundamentally from Greek actors' role-switching via mask replacement: Chinese opera pursues variation within convention, while ancient Greek drama seeks unity across role transformation.

*Xieyi*, virtuality and stylization constitute the core theoretical categories of Chinese opera performance aesthetics. Peking Opera aesthetic principles are summarized into three dimensions: *xieyi*, song-and-dance and stylization. Distinct from Western spoken drama's experiential acting that pursues lifelike realism, Chinese opera craves *shensi* (spiritual resemblance) and *yijing* beyond reality. A single glance, gesture or movement can evoke imagery of mighty armies, rivers and mountains on an almost empty stage.

### **5.2.2 Stage Audio-Visual Aesthetics**

The stage setting of traditional Chinese opera adheres to the aesthetic principle of emptiness. The traditional stage is equipped merely with one table and two chairs, devoid of realistic scenery and bulky props. Temporal and spatial transitions are realized entirely through acting and lyrics. Such virtuality is not merely technical but an aesthetic choice. Audience attention is forced on performance rather than extrinsic stage installations. The virtuality of opera stage art manifests in three dimensions: stylization, symbolism and *xieyi*, sharing common aesthetic origins with folk art.

Character styling in opera also embodies the *xieyi* aesthetic principle. Costumes follow strict stylized regulations, with fixed patterns and color symbolism corresponding to different role types, social statuses and dramatic occasions. *Lianpu* (Facial makeup) constitutes a vital component of opera cosmetic art, employing exaggerated colors and patterns to symbolize personality: red for loyalty and bravery, white for treachery and cunning, and black for uprightness and integrity. Traditional opera styling features stylization, decoration and *imagism*, with *xieyi* permeating every aspect of character design.

Music occupies a central position in Chinese opera. Theatrical music is not merely auxiliary but an indispensable medium for narration and emotional expression. Vocal melodies are tailored to *hangdang* and character dispositions, with different opera genres possessing unique tonal systems. Percussion performs a unique rhythmic function; every movement and stage pose of

performers aligns precisely with rhythmic gongs and drums, forming the artistic feature of all movement as dance, all utterance as song.

### 5.2.3 Significance of Theatrical Performance

The primary significance of Chinese opera performance lies in ethical edification. Confucius' poetic theories of *xing guan qun yuan*, together with the moral tenets in *The Preface to the Book of Songs*, laid the foundational tradition of Chinese opera's emphasis on social education. Operatic stories artistically integrate realism and goodness, subtly shaping the moral values of the mass, especially grassroots communities. Scholars categorize Chinese opera as the theatre of cultivation, in contrast to ancient Greek theatre of purgation. Chinese opera advocates virtuous conduct to cultivate public temperament, rather than dramatizing the exposure and purgation of evil.

Furthermore, Chinese opera is an integral part of folk social life. Theatrical performance is indispensable to temple fairs, seasonal festivals, weddings and funerals, undertaking multiple functions of social communication, emotional communion and cultural inheritance. Audiences are not merely passive artistic recipients but active participants in the construction of social ethics. Endings of karmic retribution consolidate popular faith in just moral order, while the joys and sorrows of dramatic figures provide the public with channels for emotional catharsis and moral contemplation.

### 5.3 Eastern Adaptations of Ancient Greek Drama

Modern and contemporary intercultural adaptations of ancient Greek tragedies by East Asian dramatists epitomize the creative integration of Eastern and Western theatrical aesthetics. Director Luo Jinlin's Hebei Bangzi adaptation of *Medea* is an epitomized model of adapting Greek tragedy into traditional Chinese opera. It abandons the structural confinement of Three Unities but adopts the point-line narrative mode conforming to Chinese aesthetic tradition. It includes the prequel: *Golden Fleece* where Chinese martial arts and symbolic performance are shown in the quest for the Golden Fleece and perilous voyages. In handling the chorus, the director integrates the ancient Greek chorus with Chinese opera's *bangqiang* and *longtao*. Chorus members shift flexibly between narrative commentators, ceremonial extras and symbolic stage imagery via water-sleeve choreography. Such artistic arrangement is consistent with "xieyi theatre" advocated by Huang Zuolin, adopting virtual, symbolic and stylized techniques to pursue *shensi* and *yijing*.

In characterization, to accommodate Chinese audience's theatrical habits, the director reinterprets Jason's betrayal as driven by political ambition rather than mere fickleness. This weakens the purely personal vengeful nature of *Medea's* infanticide and endows her resistance against injustice with moral legitimacy, enabling Chinese audiences to comprehend her motivational logic within familiar cultural frameworks, rather than resorting to superficial cultural collage.

Japanese dramatist Tadashi Suzuki explores East-West theatrical integration via an alternative path. He merges ancient Greek tragedy with the physical training systems of Japanese Noh and Kabuki theatre, forging a highly ritualized and visually stylized stage. Suzuki's directorial repertoire includes intercultural adaptations such as *The Trojan Women*, *Dionysus* and *King Lear*. His adaptations focus not on textual cultural transplantation, but on refining performers' physical expressiveness and condensing stage energy to construct an intercultural pre-expressive theatrical vocabulary. Through reinterpreting ancient Greek tragedy, he contemplates the existential essence of modern humanity.

Miyagi Satoshi's *Princess Medea* prioritizes the contemporary realistic implication and political metaphor of the classical text, embedding Greek mythology into modern Japanese historical context to generate critical reflection on specific social reality. These modern adaptive practices demonstrate that intercultural theatre transcends mere textual translation and formal indigenization; it exhibits in-depth dialogue and creative transformation of aesthetic concepts between different civilizations. In modern contexts, drama evolves beyond mere artistic entertainment into an aesthetic medium for idea dissemination and cross-cultural communication.

### 5.4 Summary

Elevating theatrical aesthetics to the cultural dimension, ancient Greek drama pursues monumental open-air performance effects, constructing a solemn, dignified and spiritually shocking aesthetic atmosphere through masks, chorus and compact stage set. Its staging undertakes intertwined political, educational and religious social functions. Traditional East Asian theatre, by contrast, centers on *xieyi*, virtuality and stylization, achieved by the Four Skills, Five Methods and role-type system. It features minimalist stage design of one table and two chairs and symbolic facial makeup aesthetics with purpose of ethical edification

and social cohesion. Modern and contemporary adaptations of Greek tragedy by Chinese and Japanese artists prove the feasibility of integrating Eastern and Western theatrical aesthetics. But such fusion must be grounded in a deep comprehension of the two aesthetic traditions, rather than a superficial patchwork of elements.

## **6 Conclusion**

### **6.1 Summary of Findings**

From philosophical foundations, dramatic narration and theatrical aesthetics, the paper conducts systematic comparison between ancient Greek drama and traditional East Asian theatre. The findings reveal an inherent logical connection in the divergences across the three dimensions.

The philosophical origin of ancient Greek drama rests in its rationalist tradition and the conception of fate, highlight of the conflict between individual will and irresistible destiny, pursuit of cathartic emotional purification. Traditional East Asian theatre is deeply influenced by Confucian ethical edification and the Taoist philosophy of the unity of human and nature, prioritizing the maintenance of ethical order and the moderation of human emotions. This fundamental philosophical divergence determines the divergent narrative and theatrical orientations of the two dramatic systems.

In terms of dramatic narration, ancient Greek drama concentrates on intense conflict within confined time and space conforming rigorously to Three Unities, generating powerful tragic impact through peripeteia and anagnorisis, with narration centered on the confrontation between individual will and fate. Traditional East Asian theatre adopts an expansive point-line narrative structure encompassing broad temporal-spatial span, depicting individuals' suffering and endurance within ethical frameworks through xieyi lyrical expression and restoring ethical order via endings of karmic retribution.

In terms of theatrical aesthetics, ancient Greek drama pursues monumental open-air staging, creating a solemn and dignified atmosphere through masks, chorus and compact scenery, with performances bearing integrated political, educational and religious functions. Traditional East Asian theatre takes virtuality, stylization and xieyi as its aesthetic core, realized by Four Skills and Five Methods. It creates infinite temporal-spatial yijing on a minimalist stage, with performances focusing on ethical edification and social integration. Modern and contemporary cross-cultural adaptations by Chinese and Japanese artists prove that the integration of Eastern and Western theatrical aesthetics can realize creative transformation on the basis of in-depth inheritance of respective traditions.

Overall, Western drama emphasizes the tragedy of individual will confronting fate, while Eastern drama stresses the reconciliation of between collective ethics and emotional expression. As is indicated by some scholars, Chinese tragedy centers on individual subjugation in interpersonal conflicts, whereas Greek tragedy focuses on the confrontation between humanity and fate or nature. Ancient Greek tragedy belongs to "the theatre of purgation" premised on the cleansing of negative emotions, while Chinese opera falls into the category of "the theatre of cultivation" that develops public temperament by advocating virtue. This divergence originates from the distinct philosophical foundations and aesthetic ideals of the two civilizations, and has forged new paths of dialogue and integration in modern cross-cultural theatrical practice.

### **6.2 Research Contributions**

The value of this research lies in three principal aspects. Theoretically, by establishing a three-dimensional analytical framework of philosophical origins–dramatic narration–theatrical aesthetics, the study realized a systematic investigation of East-West theatrical aesthetic differences. It surpasses the limitation that previous studies which mostly remained at a single dimension and provides a referential analytical paradigm for subsequent comparative theatre research. Practically, the analysis of cross-cultural adaptation cases such as Hebei Bangzi Medea offers concrete strategic references for contemporary dramatists to address core propositions in cross-cultural adaptation: integration versus superficial collage, inheritance versus innovative transformation. Culturally, this paper reveals the different ways in which the two great civilizations behind the two theatrical systems understand the common theme of human destiny, which deepens the understanding of civilizational mutual learning and promotes in-depth dialogue between Eastern and Western cultures.

### **6.3 Research Limitations**

The study still possesses limitations. Firstly, in the application of dramatic theories, although this paper incorporates Aristotle's tragic theory, Nietzsche's Apollonian-Dionysian dualism and the xieyi aesthetic theory of Chinese opera, engagement with modern theatrical theories including Brecht's epic theatre, Eugenio Barba's pre-expressive theatre and Augusto Boal's

theatre of the oppressed remains insufficient. The theoretical depth awaits further reinforcement. Secondly, in the selection of comparative texts, this paper takes Medea as the core case and references canonical works such as Chao's Orphan, Doue Yuan and Antigone. Nevertheless, the scope of selected plays remains limited. The coverage of revenge-themed works in traditional Chinese opera is particularly insufficient. Thirdly, regarding the definition of traditional East Asian theatre, this paper primarily takes Chinese opera as the representative case and touches upon Japanese adaptive practices, yet it neglects theatrical traditions in South Korea, India, Southeast Asia and other Eastern regions, failing to fully reflect the abundance of other Eastern theatrical art. Future research can expand and deepen the investigation along the above dimensions to construct a more comprehensive and in-depth comparative analytical framework.

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