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Mei Lan-Fang's American Tour and China's Images in the U.S.

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Abstract- Since the twentieth century, Peking Opera, a comprehensive stage art form, has been awarded the title of "China's national drama" and has become a well-known cultural symbol of China. Mei Lan-fang, a female impersonator, was reputed to be the most representative actor of Peking Opera. In the 1930s, Mei led a Peking Opera troupe and visited the United States. Mei's U.S. tour was not merely a spectacle orchestrated exclusively for curious Americans but was just as much designed to show the national images of China. Based on the American response to Mei Lan-fang's performance in the 1930s, this article attempts to examine what kinds of Chinese images are from the perspective of the American audiences, how they are constructed, and tries to find out the possible reasons.

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Mei Lan-Fang's American Tour and China's Images in the U.S.[1]

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Abstract- Since the twentieth century, Peking Opera, a comprehensive stage art form, has been awarded the title of "China's national drama" and has become a well-known cultural symbol of China. Mei Lan-fang, a female impersonator, was reputed to be the most representative actor of Peking Opera. In the 1930s, Mei led a Peking Opera troupe and visited the United States. Mei's U.S. tour was not merely a spectacle orchestrated exclusively for curious Americans but was just as much designed to show the national images of China. Based on the American response to Mei Lan-fang's performance in the 1930s, this article attempts to examine what kinds of Chinese images are from the perspective of the American audiences, how they are constructed, and tries to find out the possible reasons.

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Introduction

As communication and collision between China and the United States became more frequent in the early twentieth century, the idea of "national diplomacy" emerged in China, which provided opportunities for Mei Lanfang's visit to the U.S.. Paul Samuel Reinsch, former United States Minister to China, said that if the Chinese and American people wanted to have a better relationship, it would be better to invite Mei Lanfang to the United States to perform his art[2]. This could be regarded as the trigger of Mei's "cultural diplomacy." In order to let Peking Opera go abroad and make the world better understand Chinese opera, Mei's troupe began to prepare for the performance in the United States, with the joint efforts of famous Chinese playwright Qi Rushan.

After eight years of elaborate preparation, Mei Lanfang's troupe set out to perform in the United States on January 18, 1930. Mei's first performance made a stir in New York City. The ticket prices thereafter were even several times higher than the initial price. Mei was talked about in every street and alley in New York. There appeared a "Mei Lanfang fever." Although Mei's tour created quite a stir in the United States, it did not open up a new era for the Sino-U.S. cultural exchanges after this short tide.

There are roughly two research paradigms on Mei's performance in the United States: One is from the perspective of Chinese studies. Researchers attempt to explain Mei's dramatic language and meaning, for the purpose of exploring the Chinese dramatic system; The other is from the perspective of regional studies. Researchers analyze Mei's life, social contribution, and artistic heritage to evaluate the significance of this influential Chinese opera actor[3]. This article belongs to the latter, aiming to examine the image of China in the U.S. from the perspective of Americans' comments on Mei Lanfang's performances in the 1930s, to deconstruct the cultural concepts and ideological discourse behind the American gaze on Mei's Peking opera performances. This article argues that, although Mei Lanfang's visit to the United States was a great success, it did not change Americans' image of China, which was exotic, ancient, and undeveloped.

I. Exotic Space for Escaping Reality

In an 1882 report, Americans described Chinese opera as "unearthly noises."[4]Another candid journalist wrote in 1895 to express his view:

> To the nervous American, a Chinese play at its best possesses few charms. A few minutes will satisfy him for a lifetime [sic]. He wonders how anything human can live through such an excruciating din... The band strikes up with ear-splitting accompaniments of cymbals and gongs, amid which the actors scream forth their parts in a high falsetto key wholly unintelligible to an untrained ear... The fiddles screech, trumpets blare, battles rage, drums and toms-toms crash, pandemonium breaks loose, and the visitor rushes out into the night to cool his throbbing brain.[5]

Why did American audiences have different opinions on Chinese opera over just four decades? In addition to Mei Lanfang's excellent performing arts, Qi Rushan's behind-the-scenes planning and careful selection of performances, as well as American social conditions at that time, all affected whether Chinese opera as an art form was accepted or not.

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[2] 齐如山:《梅兰芳游美记:卷一》,北京:商务印书馆,1933年,第2页。

[3] 林达:《北美梅兰芳研究视野与方法刍议》,梅兰芳纪念馆网站,2019年。http://www.meilanfang.com.cn/index/show/id/301.html, visited on Sep. 6, 2019.

[4] Fitch, George H. 1882. "In a Chinese Theater." *Century Magazine* 24: 189-92.

[5] Masters, Frederic J. 1895. "The Chinese Drama." *The Chatauquan* 21: 441-42.

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American audiences' praise of Mei Lanfang's art mainly stemmed from their curiosity about Oriental exotism, not necessarily from their real sense of recognition and love. There was a comment published in the *Herald Tribune* in 1930: "The noteworthy thing was the extraordinary grace and finesse which Mr. Mei brought to his impersonations--an art as perfect as it is exotic, and quite eloquent enough to charm and held an American audience throughout the evening, even though they could but guess, most of the time, just what was being said and indicated."[6] They were not very interested in the musical instruments and falsetto of Chinese drama. They were just amazed by Mei Lanfang. "When you see him on the stage, you forget all this, and find yourself in some timeless region as lovely and harmonious as an old fairy story...You forget everything but the picture he is making,"[7] wrote by American journalist-author Arthur Ruhl.

Mei Lanfang's trip to the United States was in the early stage of the Great Depression. Banks collapsed, businesses went bankrupt, people were unemployed, and the economy declined. When Americans felt sad in real life, they turned to the stage. As a famous Asian actor, Mei Lanfang comforted American audiences with his exquisite acting skills. Americans vented their fears in the theatre and temporarily entered the fantastic exotic Eastern space to escape the difficult and hopeless reality. As a Chinese national essence, Peking Opera has become a kind of "good medicine" to cure the anxiety of the American people. Mei's American tour "could not have come at a more psychologically apt moment. The public mood prepared to be receptive to a dramatic art which ignored realism and whose calm values were those of a civilization with time behind it."[8]

II. Ancient Chinoiserie Commodity

A comment by Justin B. Atkinson, a journalist for *the New York Times*, was posted on program leaflets and advertisements: "For the drama of Peking, whence Mr. Mei and his actors come, has almost no point of similarity to the drama with which we are familiar; and the barrier of language is as nothing by comparison with the barrier of a completely exotic art…But it is as beautiful as an old Chinese vase or tapestry."[9] Robert Littell of *New York World* made similar comments: "[It was] as strong and delicate in every eloquent gesture as an old Chinese painting, very beautiful to look at for the costumes and poses alone, but also full of an immensely subtle dignity and repose."[10]

Mei Lanfang's performance evoked the American audiences' impression of ancient China. These seemingly ordinary metaphors, which connected Mei Lanfang's performance with ancient Chinese artifacts, actually materialized the performing art of Peking Opera, reflecting the hidden ideology of Americans concerning Chinese culture.

As early as the 16th century, European monarchs and upper-class nobility were bewildered by Chinese artifacts and Chinese furniture with obvious Oriental decorative patterns, which were commonly known as Chinoiserie. These exquisite Chinese objects were not only decorations, but also indicators of power, knowledge, and status. This European social custom reached its peak in the 17th century, then spread from the ancient center of Western civilization to the New World through *Mayflower*. As John Tchen, an Asian-American historian, observes, "a ritual surrounding the appreciation of chinoiserie and the constellation of meanings associated with it creates an important sense of distinction."[11] By the beginning of the 20th century, ordinary people had joined the ranks of collecting and enjoying Chinese goods. Americans took the image of ancient China as a kind of sentiment into their romantic and pure fantasy. What audiences and critics liked was the antique charm of the East. They treated the delicate and complex traditional Chinese art as objects to play.

At that time, watching Mei Lanfang's performance became a necessity for the upper class. Scalpers were able to sell a ticket which is $3.85 at the box-office for a cost as much as $18.00.[12] An American writer drew on financial figures to explain the popularity of Mei: "A few years ago, a group of American bankers paid him $4,000 for a half-hour of acting and singing. It is true that this especially large price was paid for that imponderable Oriental asset known as 'face', because a group of Japanese bankers had tried shortly before to impress their Chinese guests by paying Mei Lan-Fang $1,000 for an evening's entertainment."[13] What can be seen is that watching Mei's performance, as consumer behavior, became an indicator of rights, identity, and status for the U.S. upper class.

III. Undeveloped Inferior Art

The "image of China" in the West had undergone a subversive change around 1750. When the

[6] Ruhl, Arthur .1930. "A Description of Mei's Performance." *Herald Tribune*.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Scott, A. C. 1971. *Mei Lan-fang: The Life and Times of a Peking Actor*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press: 108.
[9] Atkinson, Justin B. 1930. "China's Idol Actor Reveals His Art." *New York Times*. 17 February no.2: 18.
[10] Moy, Ernest K.1931. *Mei Lan-fang: what New York thinks of him*, USA: [s.n]: 7.
[11] Tchen, John. 1999. *New York before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture, 1776–1882.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
[12] Chang, Peng C. 1935. *Preface to Mei Lan-Fang in America: Reviews and Criticisms*.Tientsin:c.
[13] Zucker, A. E. 1924. "China's 'Leading Lady.' "*Journal of the American Asiatic Association* 24 (August): 600.

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new bourgeoisie needed to use the favorable Eastern image to overthrow feudalism and theocracy in the West, they vigorously advocated the openness and prosperity of the East, and provided inspiration and reference for them, for the sake of inspiring the West to carry out reform. When the West established modernity through the Enlightenment and successfully overthrew the oppression of feudalism and theocracy, they no longer needed the "Utopian" image of the East to help them challenge and deny themselves.

China was no longer the birthplace of ancient wisdom, but rather a place of "the Other." After the emancipation of the mind, a new round of Western centralism came back in a more rampant way. They desperately needed to find a sense of self-identified superiority by proving their strength compared to the weaknesses of "the Other." The words, such as "darkness," "backwardness," "decay," "stagnancy," "autocracy" and "barbarian," all became synonymous with China. Cultural hegemony and the thinking mode of superiority/inferiority formed a common concept in western society. It was just like the saying of Edward W. Said: "Everything in the East, if it is not obviously inferior to that in the West, also needs the correct study by the west to be understood."[14]

American critics generally claimed that everything in Peking Opera had been artisticized. It was an unrealistic art, and its performance was formalized, which couldn't reflect the social reality. Commentator Gilbert Seldes complained: "The same thing holds to a degree, for Mr. Mei, since the voice, the make-up, the gestures, all of them meaningful to the Chinese, are empty of significance for the American." [15] J. Brooks Atkinson held that, Peking Opera was "an arrested form of classical drama" with virtually no striving after illusion and hardly a suggestion of realism.[16]

> "Everyone admits that the drama of the western world is in a more advanced stage... For most of us Americans, we are accustomed to western dramatic photographic performances. Chinese performers' mime performances, such as raising feet to show crossing the threshold, bending down to show entering the low porch, turning a few circles on the stage to show entering another space, embody undecorated 'Simple and natural.' It's kind of like what children do when they play games." [17]

Atkinson regarded the rules of the Chinese theatrical imagination, the most essential premise of drama activities, as the naive imagination in children's games. He thought that Peking Opera lacked the realistic concern for society and was, therefore, more inferior than Western drama. After seeing Mei Lanfang's performance, American audiences unconsciously fell into the Orientalism misconception that China was a naive, uncivilized country.

IV. Conclusion

We cannot deny the significance of Mei Lanfang's performance in the Sino-U.S. cultural exchange. But in a specific historical environment, the American attention to Mei Lanfang's performance was only a selective preference for the exotic ancient culture. Equal cultural exchanges between China and the United States have been hampered by the arrogance of American culture and the inferiority complex of Chinese traditional culture. For some historical, political, and economic reasons, Chinese culture is still at a disadvantage in competition with Western culture nowadays.

[14] 爱德华·W·萨义德著，王宇根译：《东方学》，北京：生活·读书·新知（三联书店），1999年，第50页。
[15] Moy, 11.
[16] Atkinson,18
[17] Moy, 26.

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