

A Comparative Study of the Aesthetic Characteristics of Chinese Nuo Opera and Japanese Noh Opera

Sinuo Sun*

Harbin Conservatory of Music, Harbin 152000, China

*Corresponding email: sunsinuo1209@163.com

Abstract

Chinese Nuo Opera and Japanese Noh Opera have deep cultural and artistic connections, and each has its own unique aesthetic style. Originating in the Shang Dynasty, Nuo was gradually refined during the Zhou, Han, Tang, and Song dynasties. It was later introduced to Japan via ancient Sino-Japanese cultural exchanges and integrated with local traditions to give birth to Noh Opera. The two art forms share similarities in mask usage and stage characteristics. Comparatively speaking, Nuo Opera builds an aesthetic space for scene blending with “artistic conception beauty” and reflects moderation and harmony under Confucianism with “neutral beauty”. Noh Opera guides the audience to understand the deep spirit with “mysterious beauty” and conveys the mournful understanding of the impermanence of things with “mourning aesthetics”. Both follow the principle of “replacing complexity with simplicity”, Nuo Opera condenses ritual movements as a program, and Noh Opera uses subtle body language to convey emotions, both of which use art to convey spirituality, reflect the history of Sino-Japanese cultural exchanges, and highlight the essence of traditional East Asian drama “carrying the way with beauty”.

Keywords

Chinese Nuo Opera, Japanese Noh Opera, Aesthetic characteristics, Comparative study

Introduction

As two iconic representatives of traditional East Asian drama, Chinese Nuo Opera and Japanese Noh Opera share a profound historical and cultural origin. Originating in China's Shang Dynasty, Nuo Opera evolved and flourished during the Zhou, Han, Tang, and Song dynasties. It embodies ancient rituals of exorcism, sacrifice, and blessing, as well as Confucian notions of harmony and Taoist philosophy of “the unity of man and nature”. During the frequent cultural exchanges between ancient China and Japan - particularly through Japan's envoys to the Sui and Tang dynasties - Nuo culture was introduced to the Japanese archipelago. There, it merged with local Shinto beliefs, Zen philosophy, and folk customs, giving birth to Noh Opera: a unique artistic form with distinct Japanese characteristics [1].

Both art forms adhere to the aesthetic principle of “replacing complexity with simplicity”, relying on stylized performances, symbolic masks, and minimalist stages to convey spiritual connotations beyond material forms. However, rooted in distinct cultural soils, the two

have developed unique aesthetic traits: Chinese Nuo Opera is characterized by “conception beauty” that integrates scenes and “neutral beauty” emphasizing moderation and harmony. In contrast, Japanese Noh Opera is marked by “mysterious beauty” pursuing subtlety and implication, as well as “mourning aesthetics” reflecting on the impermanence of all things. This study aims to compare these core aesthetic characteristics, exploring their similarities, differences, and underlying cultural logic. To achieve this, we not only deepen the understanding of the artistic value of Nuo Opera and Noh Opera but also uncover the profoundness of historical cultural exchanges and mutual influences between China and Japan. Furthermore, it highlights the shared spiritual pursuit of “conveying the way through beauty” in traditional East Asian drama.

The influence of the origin and development of “Nuo” on the birth of Japanese Noh Opera

The origin and development of “Nuo” played an

important role in promoting the birth of the Japanese Noh art form, and this influence occupies a non-negligible position in the history of Sino-Japanese cultural exchanges. The word “Nuo” was first seen in the *Book of Songs, Wei Feng, Bamboo Pole*: “The clever smile, the jade of the pendant.” This sentence means “there is moderation”. In this sentence, the word “Nuo” describes the etiquette and behavioral norms of a gentleman, which has not yet been directly related to the later exorcism rituals. With the passage of time, the word “Nuo” gradually evolved and was closely related to the ritual of exorcising evil spirits and avoiding epidemics, becoming an important cultural phenomenon in primitive religious culture and ancient society. Its connotation is rich, encompassing various art forms such as rituals, dances, Nuo masks, Nuo songs, and Nuo Opera. It also embodies philosophical ideas of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, between humans and the unknown world, as well as the unity of nature and humanity [2].

Nuo Opera was called ghost fighting in the Shang Dynasty and became a national ritual in the Zhou Dynasty, during which “Nuo” was continuously improved, and the meaning of the ghost exorcism ceremony was determined [3]. In the *Zhou Li Xia Guan*, there is a specific record of “Nuo”: “Fang Xiangshi, palm covered with bear skin, golden four eyes, black clothes and red clothes, holding a spear and a shield, handsome and difficult (Nuo), to drive away the epidemic with the rope.” This account describes the ancient Fang Xiang clan who served as the duty of warding off evil spirits and epidemics, dressed in black costumes and red skirts, wearing bearskin masks decorated with golden eyes, and holding shields and weapons. Expel diseases and hoodoos by examining and purifying spaces to maintain people’s health and safety. This practice reflects the importance that ancient society attached to the prevention and control of epidemics, as well as the central role of Nuo culture in folk life. Toward the end of the Han Dynasty, the status of the Grand Nuo was elevated. It was designated as an official court ceremony hosted by the royal family, and its scale grew increasingly magnificent.

As recorded in *Book of the Later Han Dynasty: Records of Rites and Ceremonies*, “At the year’s end in the twelfth month, hundreds of attendants and youths

perform the Nuo ritual to expel epidemic spirits.” The ceremony was to select one hundred and twenty young men from the Yellow Gate over ten years old and under twelve to form the Yellow Gate, all wearing red headscarves and black patterns, holding large drums. The Fang Xiang clan has four golden eyes, covers themselves with bear skins, dressed in black and red skirts, wielding a spear and a shield. Twelve beasts have clothing, fur, and horns. The Central Yellow Gate is carried out, led by the Assistant Minister, to drive away evil spirits from the palace [4]. This record fully demonstrates the important position of Nuo Opera at that time and its far-reaching influence.

The Tang Dynasty witnessed the heyday of Nuo culture. Works such as *New Book of Tang: Rites and Music* and *Yuefu Miscellaneous Records* documented in detail the magnificent scenes of the Grand Nuo ceremony back then. These records profoundly reflect the ancient people’s worship of nature and mystical powers, while also mirroring folk beliefs and social life. The Grand Nuo ceremony not only entertained the people but also assumed the edifying function of imparting ethical values and behavioral norms [5].

Time entered the Dynasty, and the prosperity of Da Nuo was still the same, but the “Fang Xiang clan” no longer appeared in the court documents, and was replaced by the exorcism ceremony of the palace musicians wearing masks. *Mengliang Record* depicts that from the first day of the twelfth lunar month to New Year’s Eve, children would form groups, beat drums, hold flags aloft, and stage “barbaric mask plays” to drive away evil spirits. Meanwhile, they would impersonate the images of justice deities to perform exorcism rituals - all of which are customs inherited from ancient times. This kind of activity not only demonstrates the popularity of Nuo Opera among the people, but also reflects its profound influence on social culture [6].

Over time, this ritual gradually spread to Japan and integrated with local religions, folk customs, and art forms, eventually forming Noh with native Japanese characteristics. There are obvious similarities between the two art forms of “Nuo” and “Neng”. Linguistic analysis shows that the Chinese pronunciation of “Nuo” is very similar to the pronunciation of “able” in Japanese, and this pronunciation proximity may indicate possible cultural exchanges or mutual influences

between the two. In his book *Noh Words*, Toyochiro Nogami believes that Noh is a compound art that draws on various arts, and still retains many elements of Chinese culture in performing arts. For example, Nuo Opera and Noh Opera both use masks to perform in performances, as well as highly similar repertoire settings, stage characteristics, religious culture, etc., whether through singing or dialogue, they can reflect their unique artistic charm.

In addition, according to the records of the *Book of Wei: The Biography of the Wajin*, the ancient Japanese archipelago had frequent exchanges with Chinese culture. In 413 AD, the five kings of Yamato began to take the initiative to interact with China and pay tribute to the Eastern Jin Dynasty. In the process of sending the Sui and Tang dynasties after that, ancient Japan learned and absorbed a lot of traditional Chinese culture, including music, art, religion and other aspects. During this period, many Japanese music scholars, known as “sound students”, were sent to China for further study. They not only brought back Chinese musical instruments and scores, but also conducted in-depth research and interpretation, promoting the spread of Nuo culture to the Japanese archipelago, and was absorbed and evolved locally. Ancient Japanese books, such as the *Nihon Shoki* and *Kojiki*, have repeatedly recorded the relevant content of Nuo Opera. These records show that the development of Nuo Opera in Japan was not only influenced by China, but also integrated with local religions, folk customs and art forms, and finally formed Noh with local Japanese characteristics.

The origin and development of Nuo exerted a profound influence on the emergence of Japanese Noh. Nuo evolved from exorcism rituals into theatrical performing arts. This transformation not only reflected the emphasis ancient Chinese society placed on epidemic prevention and control, but also revealed people’s reverence for natural phenomena and worship of mystical powers. At the same time, the birth and development of Japanese Noh have been profoundly influenced by Chinese Nuo culture. Evolving from “Sanraku” to “Monkey Music” and then to “Noh”, this process not only absorbed Chinese artistic forms but also integrated local Japanese religions, folk customs, and artistic traditions, ultimately forming Noh with distinct Japanese

characteristics [7].

The connections and differences between Nuo and Noh, along with their developmental paths in their respective cultures, help us grasp the intrinsic value of these two art forms. They also offer valuable insights into the cultural exchanges and interactions between China and Japan. Although the two differ in their aesthetic intentions, they both use art as a medium to reach the spiritual world of the audience. By stirring emotional resonance, they embody the unique cognition and profound understanding of beauty within their respective cultural systems. Although their aesthetic pursuits show distinct tendencies, they both employ unique artistic paradigms to engage the audience emotionally. In this way, they reveal their respective cultures’ distinctive understanding and profound insight into beauty through artistic practice.

The artistic conception and beauty of Chinese Nuo Opera and the mysterious beauty of Japanese Noh Opera

The artistic conception of Chinese Nuo Opera

As a distinctive branch of Chinese Opera that integrates primitive ritual and artistic aesthetics, Nuo Opera embodies the spiritual essence of ancient shamanic culture. Its aesthetic core aligns closely with the central category of artistic conception in traditional Chinese aesthetics. Wang Guowei put forward the aesthetic standard of opera artistic conception in the “History of Song and Yuan Opera”, that is, the blending of scenes. “Writing love is refreshing, writing scenery is in people’s ears and eyes, and narrating things is as it is spoken.” This theory provides a key paradigm for interpreting the aesthetic characteristics of Nuo Opera. The artistic conception and beauty of Nuo Opera is not simply presented in form, but systematically constructs an aesthetic space through artistic symbols, realizes the transcendence of material form and the sublimation of spiritual connotation, and finally achieves an aesthetic effect that is endless and meaningful [8].

From the perspective of artistic expression, Nuo Opera builds a multi-dimensional carrier of artistic conception and beauty through the synergy of masks, costumes, performances, vocal cavities, and stage props. On the one hand, the mask shape has both the characteristics of exaggerated deformation and divine form, such as the

“Kaishan Mangjiang” mask with angular outlines, red and inky black intense colors. On the other hand, the “Miss Xianfeng” mask conveys a gentle and agile temperament with rounded lines, pink and white backgrounds and slender eyebrows and eyes [9]. This formal difference is not simply an aesthetic divergence, but conveys characters’ personalities and spiritual meanings through visual symbols such as mask colors and linear forms. It enables the audience to empathize with the characters’ inner world through direct perception and thus realize the artistic conception of divine unity (Figure 1 and Figure 2).

The costumes and performances further enhance the immersive experience of artistic conception. Nuo Opera costumes are mostly made of coarse cloth fabrics, but through the five-color combination of blue, red, yellow, white and black. It is in line with the traditional Chinese five elements culture, symbolizing the reverence for the gods of heaven and earth. while secular characters are mainly light-colored, close to the texture of life [10]. This color choice not only shapes the identity of the characters, but also introduces the audience into a specific cultural context through the metaphor of cultural symbols. In terms of performance movements, stylized acts such as “three steps and one bow” and “sweeping sleeves and turning” in Nuo Opera are not mere physical displays. Instead, they convey the characters’ emotional fluctuations through rhythmic postures. For instance, the forceful “stepping on the gang” strides in exorcism rituals, paired with rapid drumbeats, create a tense and solemn atmosphere. The slow body movements and melodious singing in the blessing scene build a peaceful and tranquil artistic conception, allowing the audience to feel a spiritual experience that transcends reality in the alternation of movement and stillness.

Although the stage and prop design of Nuo Opera is based on the principle of simplicity, it implies the artistic conception of simplicity to create wisdom. Unlike the complex stages of Kunqu Opera, Peking Opera and other operas, Nuo Opera mostly uses open-air venues or simple high stages as performance spaces, and the props only retain the core symbols. Props such as “magic sword”, “peach wood sword”, “grain bag” and so on transform material carriers into spiritual symbols, allowing the audience to construct a

broad aesthetic space through association and imagination in limited visual elements. This kind of ethereal artistic conception is similar to the “blending of emptiness and substance” in traditional Chinese landscape painting, carrying rich cultural meanings within a simple form. It enables the audience to grasp the ideals of harmony between humans and nature, and between individuals and society embedded in Nuo Opera through observing images and reflecting on truth. Nuo Opera masks express spirit through form, and costumes use color to imply meaning. Performances convey emotion through movement, stages create atmosphere through simplicity, and vocals accentuate the scene through sound. These elements collectively form an aesthetic system of integrated scene and emotion, blending the virtual and the real. It reflects the traditional Chinese aesthetic pursuit of “artistic conception” while highlighting the aesthetic value and cultural depth of Nuo Opera as a living cultural heritage.



Figure 1. “Kaishan Mang will” Nuo Tang Opera mask.



Figure 2. “Miss Xianfeng” mask.

The “mysterious beauty” of Japanese Noh Opera

As the core of traditional Japanese aesthetic consciousness, the source of “Yugenbi” can be traced back to the literary concept of the Middle Ages [11]. Fujiwara Toshinari has already mentioned the aesthetic pursuit of “deep heart” (deep meaning) in *Ancient Styles*, emphasizing that artistic expression needs to go beyond straightforward and exposed, and tend to be subtle and euphemistic. Different from the aesthetic paradigm that chases strong sensory impact, the mysterious beauty is marked by subtlety and gentleness, with its core lying in the exploration of mystery and transcendence.

It rejects both deliberate emotional release and the presentation of concrete meanings, instead preferring to guide viewers to perceive the spiritual connotations beyond the superficial form through blank spaces and implications. The core of this aesthetic consciousness lies in pursuing “lingering emotions” and “remaining charm” as the goal, rather than conveying feelings and meanings completely. It reserves an “unfinished” space in expression, allowing viewers to fill the gaps through their own associations and perceptions. From a philosophical perspective, the beauty of the universe is deeply in line with the idea of “nothingness” in Zen Buddhism, which is not obsessed with the concrete “being”, but in the artistic conception of emptiness and emptiness, it guides people to inner spiritual reflection.

In the artistic expression of Noh, the mysterious beauty penetrates layer by layer through the multi-dimensional symbol system, which is first reflected in the design and application of “Noh mask” (mask). As the core carrier of actors’ emotional expression, Noh mask does not pursue the realism of “shape”, but aims at “similarity”. It is small and exquisite in shape, with facial features recreated through exaggeration or simplification. Typical examples include the female Noh masks “Idomengawa” and “Kogao”, whose facial features are rendered in geometric lines. The eyebrows are slightly lowered, the mouth corners are kept straight, and the overall effect is an “expressionless expression”, which leaves ample room for the viewer’s interpretation. When the actor wears the Noh mask and makes subtle head turns, viewers can associate the character’s hidden complex emotions such as joy and sorrow from the shadow changes in the mask’s eyes and the curvature of the face. This achieves the mysterious effect of

conveying a thousand emotions with an expressionless appearance.

Stage design and performance style. The Noh stage abandons the complicated scenery like the Nuo Opera performance space, and the Noh stage is constructed only by mirror panels (background panels), bridge suspensions (passages connecting the stage and backstage), and a small number of props. For example, a pine branch is used to suggest the forest, and a cloth curtain is used to symbolize the dwelling, using objects instead of scenery to guide the viewer to break away from the dependence on the real scene and enter the pure spiritual aesthetic level.

In terms of performance style, the movements of Noh actors are characterized by slowness and moderation, whether it is foot rhythm (foot rhythm) or hand posture (hand movements), they are strictly stylized, but do not pursue strong dramatic conflicts. When portraying characters’ sorrow, actors convey emotions only through subtle body language: slight trembling of the shoulders, slowly drooping arms, and low, soft singing. This aligns with the restrained, understated nature of serene and mysterious beauty, enabling viewers to perceive deep emotions in the subtlest details.

The plot theme and voice system provide both thought and sensory support for the mysterious beauty. Noh plays are mostly adapted from classical literary works and historical legends, including *The Tale of Genji* and *The Tale of the Heike*. Their recurring themes include the harmony between human and nature, the impermanence of fate, and the intervention of supernatural powers. The Noh play *Well* takes the love between Minamoto no Yoshihira and his wife as its narrative thread. Through dialogues between a monk and a village girl, together with verses from the chorus, it transforms longing into philosophical reflections on the passage of time and the impermanence of the world. In terms of sound, the Noh “Yuko” Hayashi (accompaniment music) is mainly played by the “Kokokata” Hayakata (musician), and the melody is simple and repetitive, but it creates a quiet and far-reaching atmosphere. The lyrics largely employ waka-style metaphors and suggestions, for example, drifting cherry blossoms often symbolize fleeting beauty. Through the synergy of sound and verse, viewers are led to perceive further the spiritual core of mysterious

beauty, transcending both the concrete and the abstract in their auditory experience.

As Junichiro Tanizaki notes in *In Praise of Shadows*, traditional Japanese aesthetics “discover true meaning in darkness and subtlety”. As a concentrated expression of this aesthetic ideal, mysterious beauty is not an isolated concept. Instead, it permeates Noh’s masks, stages, performances, plots, and vocal styles, forming an integrated aesthetic system [12]. Through artistic transformation of the Yūgen spirit, Noh has not only become a treasure of traditional Japanese art but also established an aesthetic paradigm centered on spiritual experience. This offers an important perspective for understanding the profound characteristics of Japanese culture.

Analysis of similarities and differences

Comparing the artistic conception beauty of Chinese Nuo Opera and the mysterious beauty of Japanese Noh Opera, the aesthetic difference between the two is first reflected in the form orientation and perceptual path of artistic expression.

From the perspective of expression form, the mysterious beauty takes static introspection as its core trait. The expressionless design of Noh masks, the minimalist stage sets, and the restrained, slow-paced performance movements all avoid direct emotional outpouring by reducing external conflicts. They rely more on suggestion and symbolism to guide the audience’s comprehension. Although Nuo Opera also pursues spiritual transcendence, it emphasizes conveying aesthetic experience through the emotional expression of figurative elements. For instance, the bold colors of the Kaishan Mangjiang mask in Guizhou Nuo Opera, the powerful “stepping on the gang” movements of performers, and the fluctuating vocal delivery all arouse the audience’s emotional resonance with intuitive, tangible artistic symbols. This approach preserves the authenticity of emotional expression while achieving “concrete perception” by integrating natural scenes and emotions. One example is the combination of candle flames and ritual gestures in sacrificial scenes, which leads the audience toward spiritual understanding.

From the perspective of perceptual path, Japanese mysterious beauty pays more attention to blank guidance, and its aesthetic realization depends on the

viewer’s active filling of unfinished things. The geometric facial features of Noh masks and the repetitive, understated music do not offer fixed or complete interpretive direction. Instead, they leave ample room for personal interpretation, encouraging viewers to move beyond sensory impressions and engage in direct, intuitive experience to explore profound spiritual connotations. Through the synergy of masks, costumes, and performances, Nuo Opera constructs a perceptible and comprehensible aesthetic space. It enables the audience to naturally enter the spiritual realm of “harmony between emotion and scenery” while engaging with concrete artistic elements. Its aesthetic approach tends to progress from the real to the abstract, in contrast to the mysterious beauty of Noh, which moves from the abstract to the real.

Although the two differ in aesthetic form, both are rooted in East Asian culture and share the core pursuit of transcending the material to attain spiritual beauty. Artistic conception beauty, through the fusion of emotion and nature, leads viewers to break free from reality and achieve the spiritual state of “limited words, infinite meaning” - that Wang Guowei called “unity of scene and feeling.” Mysterious beauty, while bearing Japan’s unique depth and mystery, avoids direct, intense sensory stimulation and favors gentle, gradual spiritual immersion. It too transcends superficial experience, using Zen-inspired “nothingness” to lead audiences toward inner beauty in a tranquil atmosphere. In common, both go beyond the materiality of artistic elements. They guide viewers to look past surface forms and uncover deeper cultural meanings and emotions through symbolic transformation. Nuo opera’s poetic beauty uses masks and movements to convey harmony between humanity and nature. By contrast, Noh’s mysterious beauty employs its masks and chants to express the philosophy of impermanence (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Core aesthetic symbols of “Nuo” and “Noh”.

It should be added that although the mysterious beauty and artistic conception beauty belong to different cultural systems in China and Japan, the pursuit of spiritual beauty is deeply related to traditional East Asian philosophy. Although the two differ in their specific philosophical origins, both take philosophical thought as their aesthetic core and achieve the artistic sublimation from “form” to “spirit”. This has also become an important ideological foundation for the two to transcend cultural differences and share common spiritual aesthetic pursuits.

The “beauty of neutrality” in Chinese Nuo Opera and the mourning aesthetics of Japanese Noh Opera

The beauty of neutrality

Against the cultural backdrop of China’s long-standing Confucian dominance, the beauty of equilibrium and moderation has long served as a core category in traditional aesthetics. In *The Analects Bayi*, Confucius praised the *Shao* hymn as “perfectly beautiful and perfectly good”. He also commented on the poem *Guan Ju* in *The Book of Songs* as expressing “joy without licentiousness, sorrow without excessive grief”. It not only requires the sincerity of emotional transmission, but also opposes the “bias” caused by excessive catharsis, and ultimately points to the dual realm of morality and aesthetics of “thinking without innocence”. This aesthetic idea of “harmony is precious and moderation is important” is deeply in line with the functional attributes of Nuo Opera of “sacrifice and blessing, and educating the people”, making it an important artistic carrier of “the beauty of neutrality”.

From the perspective of character building, Nuo Opera’s practice of “the beauty of neutrality” is first reflected in the harmony between character and visual symbols. The role system of Nuo Opera follows the doctrine of the golden mean and avoids extreme character portrayals. Righteous deities such as the Earth God and the God of Creation exhibit a solemn yet gentle demeanor, devoid of excessive majesty or oppression, as well as frivolity and restlessness. Even if the exorcism characters such as the founding mountain and the general have strong characteristics, the core purpose of their exorcism is to protect tranquility, not to show violence, and to point to a kind of order reconciliation. This personality trait is further visualized and touchable through the Nuo Opera

mask. As Li Zehou notes in *Four Lectures on Aesthetics*, traditional Chinese aesthetics takes harmony as its core and pursues the balance of reason in visual symbols. It is through this visual moderation that Nuo Opera masks reinforce the dual identity of characters - both aesthetic and moral [13].

At the level of emotional expression, Nuo Opera interprets the beauty of neutrality in a sincere way in restraint. Unlike some Opera genres that pursue strong emotional conflicts, the performance of Nuo Opera actors must always maintain a moderate emotional tension. The singing voice of Nuo Opera is composed of two categories: positive and minor, the main voice is rough and simple, the minor key is cheerful and smooth, and the folk song flavor is strong. The singing voice is divided into high cavity, flat cavity, mournful cavity, flower drum cavity, folk song cavity, etc. The singing form is going and drum accompaniment, vocals connected, and the musical atmosphere is very warm. When expressing joy, there is no excessive cheerful jumping or noise, and when conveying sadness, it also avoids heart-wrenching crying or exaggerated body twitching, so that the audience can perceive emotions while not falling into excessive mood swings. This paradigm of expression that is indulgent but not indulgent, restrains but not only retains the authenticity of emotions, but also shows full neutrality, always maintaining a balance between emotional experience and rational cognition.

Music and dance, as the core elements of Nuo Opera performance, are also the direct carriers of the beauty of neutrality. Nuo Opera music primarily relies on folk musical instruments such as drums, gongs, suonas, and flutes. Though the suona boasts a bright timbre, it avoids shrill, piercing sustained notes; instead, it often pairs with deep drumbeats to create an auditory effect that balances rigidity and softness. The melody of the flute is mostly graceful and gentle, and the rhythm is mainly medium-speed, without a rushing fast tempo or a slow rhythm, and always maintains a moderate sense of flow. The dance movements are a combination of strength and femininity, although the steps are strong, but there are no blunt setbacks, each step has a soft transition, and the whole presents a rigid but not strong, soft but not weak posture. The synergy of music and dance allows the audience to feel the comfort brought

by neutralization in the dual experience of hearing and vision, and then it is easier to understand the emotions of the characters and the connotation of the plot.

The plot structure of Nuo Opera also penetrates the concept of neutralizing the beauty of harmony, and is deeply bound to the function of Confucian education. Nuo Opera narratives mostly revolve around the retribution of good and evil and the cycle of cause and effect. They typically conclude with the restoration of order and peace for the people, conveying the belief that justice will ultimately triumph over evil and harmony will eventually return. This plot design not only aligns with the Confucian goal of cultivating virtue through moral education, but also embodies the aesthetic pursuit of harmonious moderation by presenting conflicts in a measured way and ultimately restoring balance. Without evading the reality of social contradictions, it uses a harmonious ending to guide the audience toward goodness, thereby achieving the unity of truth, goodness, and beauty (Figure 4).



Figure 4. China Nuo Opera.

Aesthetics of mourning

In the classical Japanese aesthetic system, *mono no aware* as interpreted in *The Tale of Genji* denotes an empathetic perception of all things in the world. It includes both the keen capture of fleeting beauty, such as the bloom of cherry blossoms and the sorrowful awareness of impermanence, such as the transience of life and the fading of beauty. Its essence lies in “using emotion as a bond to connect human aesthetic experience with that of all things”. As a representative form of traditional Japanese theater, Noh deeply inherits this aesthetic concept. It transforms the spiritual core of *mono no aware* into a tangible artistic form through the integration of character creation, emotional expression, stage symbolism, and vocal techniques. Thus, it has become an important carrier of the

aesthetics of *mono no aware* [14].

From the perspective of character building, the core of Noh’s presentation of mourning lies in the tragic resonance of fate and emotion. Noh characters often have an impermanent fate, and their emotions are not violent outbursts, but restrained sadness. When she boarded the Sumida River ferry that was about to depart, the boatman was hesitant to let her board because of her abnormal demeanor, until he heard her lament the pain of finding her son with a *waka* song, and was touched by this obsession. And when the boatman told her that “a kidnapped teenager died of illness a year ago, and a memorial service was being held on the other side”, she was shocked to realize that it was her child and fell to the ground crying instantly. Even if the soul of the child is briefly reunited with the soul of the child while chanting in front of the tomb, the warmth of mother and son recognition is fleeting with the dawn, leaving only eternal separation. Throughout the performance, the heroine conveys her sorrow in a consistently restrained manner. Her slightly bowed posture conceals the despair of searching for her child, while her slow, dragging steps reveal the weariness of her journey and the weight of her fixation. Her low, intermittent recitation and *waka* verses serve not only as a call to her child but also as a lament for the impermanence of fate.

Instead of venting her grief through heart-wrenching sobs, she encapsulates the pain of separation, the sorrow of life and death, and the melancholy of fleeting reunion within the subtleties of her movement and speech. The key to this character design is to break through the conventional narrative of reunion after searching, and strengthen the impermanence core of mourning with the tragedy of “the child is dead and the soul is difficult to keep”. From the heroine’s experience, the audience can not only empathize with the sorrow of losing family bonds.

They also come to understand the universal law that all beautiful things are destined to fade away. In this way, viewers achieve a profound emotional resonance between humanity and all things in nature. As Nobunaga Motoi said, “The beauty of mourning is not in the sadness itself, but in the sadness, we see the common principle of impermanence in all things.” The character creation of *Sumida River* is the ultimate artistic transformation of this concept.

In the Noh Opera “Kumano”, facing his beloved

concubine Kumano, who repeatedly begged for leave on the grounds that his mother was seriously ill, Munemori thought that “only this spring, I want to use her as a companion for flower viewing.” When Chaoyan brought a letter from Kumano’s mother who was critically ill and hoping for her daughter to return home, Kumano interceded again, but Zongsheng still refused and forced her to go enjoy the flowers with her. Starting from the bustling Kyoto, the crowd passed through many famous historical sites, temples and shrines, and marched towards Higashiyama, where the cherry blossoms were in full bloom. Kumano’s heart was filled with worries about his mother’s condition, and the cherry blossoms along the way could not comfort her in the slightest. After arriving at Kiyomizu-dera Temple, Kumano hid in the Buddhist Hall to pray for his mother, but was forcibly dragged to a banquet and asked to dance. At this moment, rain falls upon the cherry blossoms, scattering the petals one by one. Moved by this scene, Kumano sighs: “How heartless this rain is. Yet as an ancient song goes, none escape this fate, thus, tears turn to rain.” She then chants: “What shall I do now? My heart aches with longing for my hometown.”

“Kyoto cherishes the spring scenery, and the eastern country will fall flowers”, which finally moved Munemori. After Kumano praised the merits of Shimizu Kannon, he embarked on his way home. In this process, the poem uses natural imagery to metaphorically express sorrow, and the rain hitting the cherry blossoms symbolizes the breakdown of Kumano’s beautiful state of mind and the impermanence of fate. Music and poetry intertwine throughout the performance. Amid the low, sorrowful melody, the audience listens to Kumano’s voice and grasps the depth and complexity of her emotions through her lines. In the interplay of sound and verse, viewers fully experience the allure of *mono no aware* aesthetics.

What needs to be further analyzed is that mourning is not simply sentimentality or sympathy, but a unique way of understanding beauty and life in Japanese culture. Noh does not shy away from sorrow, instead, it transforms grief into an aesthetic experience. Through its characters, stagecraft, music, and poetry, the art form guides the audience to comprehend the essence of all things’ impermanence while perceiving sorrow. In turn, this deepens their understanding of the profound

proposition of “cherishing existence”. As Nobunaga Motoi said when interpreting *The Tale of Genji*, “Those who mourn things feel their beauty when they see flowers, and feel their sorrow when they see flowers wither, which is the perception of the true nature of all things.” Through the systematic expression of *mono no aware* aesthetics, Noh has not only become an invaluable treasure of traditional Japanese art. It also embodies the profound reflections of Japanese culture on nature, life, and existence. In doing so, it offers an important perspective for understanding the spiritual core of Japanese aesthetics.

Analysis of similarities and differences

From the perspective of philosophical origins and aesthetic orientation, Zhonghe aesthetics is rooted in the Confucian ideological system. As reflected in Confucius’ statement that *The Guan Ju* is “joyful but not licentious, sorrowful but not distressing”, it pursues the dialectical unity of emotional expression and rational restraint. It opposes extreme emotional outbursts and stresses that artistic creation must strike a balance between emotional release and self-control. This concept is not merely an abstract theoretical projection in Nuo Opera; it permeates all dimensions of its artistic practice. In character creation, for instance, both the solemn gentleness of righteous deities and the fortitude of exorcists are portrayed with measured restraint. In this way, all characterizations avoid falling into the extremities of a one-sided trait. In terms of emotional expression, even if it shows the earnestness of praying for blessings or the solemnity of exorcising evil spirits, it is bounded by moderation and does not pursue intense emotional outbursts. In music and dance design, the peaceful melody and the movement of rigidity and softness also follow the harmonious aesthetic logic. The plot arrangement mostly ends with conflict resolution and order return, which is the concrete embodiment of the pursuit of balance and orientation of neutrality aesthetics.

In contrast, the ideological foundation of *mono no aware* aesthetics stems from Japan’s traditional worldview of impermanence. It was systematically theorized by Motoori Norinaga through his interpretation of *The Tale of Genji*. This aesthetic centers on capturing the fleeting, melancholic qualities of transient beauty; it does not evade sorrow, yet rejects

direct, unrefined emotional outpouring. Instead, it guides the audience to grasp the spiritual significance beneath surface emotions through subtle symbolism and artistic ellipsis. This aesthetic also takes concrete form in Noh Opera. In character portrayal, the longing of the female ghost searching for her child in *Sumida River* and Kumano's maternal devotion in *Kumano* both convey emotion through restrained sorrow, not violent weeping. In emotional expression, performers draw on subtle shifts in facial energy and slow, deliberate movements to transform grief into profound insight. The stage design uses simple symbols to imply sorrow, so as to achieve the effect of metaphor for emotions and scenery to set off sorrow.

Although the aesthetic paths of the two are significantly different, there are deep similarities in artistic function and spiritual pursuit. Nuo Opera uses harmonious and balanced artistic forms to express the cultural ideal of unity between heaven and humanity. Noh theater conveys mono no aware aesthetics via understated grief to enhance the audience's perception of transience. In essence, both art forms employ art as a bridge to transcend the boundary between work and the viewer. This pursuit of conveying cultural cognition through art and linking people and culture with emotion distinguishes the two aesthetics as belonging to different cultural systems. Yet together, they reveal the essential traits of traditional East Asian art: Touching hearts with emotion and embodying truth through beauty. They also reflect the distinctive and profound understanding of beauty held by China and Japan.

The stylized expression of the performance action of “replacing the complex with simplicity” is collectively reflected in the pursuit of “freehand”

The performance movements of Chinese Nuo Opera and Japanese Noh both follow a principle of simplification. They condense everyday body language into fixed formal routines, with only a few subtle symbolic gestures, they carry ideographic meaning far beyond the actions themselves.

Chinese Nuo Opera: Freehand expression of ritualized movements

The performance movements of Chinese Nuo Opera originated in ancient shamanic and Nuo sacrificial rituals. After a long process of evolution, core routines

have been established, such as “treading the hexagram positions”, “clasped salutation” and “sweeping sleeves and turning”. Each gesture carries a distinct and well-defined cultural symbolism. Take Pingxiang in Jiangxi as an example. Situated in western Jiangxi and bordering Liling and Liuyang in eastern Hunan, Pingxiang belonged to the Wu State in the Spring and Autumn Period and to Chu in the Warring States Period, and has long been known as “the throat of Wu and Chu”. Historical records note that “the people of Chu were skilled in shamanism”, and the local saying goes that “one general every five li, one Nuo god every ten li”. This attests to the prevalence of shamanic culture and laid a solid cultural foundation for the inheritance of the Nuo God performance in Pingxiang. Pingxiang Nuo God Performance, as the core component of Nuo activities, centers on the main deities of Generals Tang, Ge, and Zhou. Its core purpose lies in dispelling epidemics and evil spirits, with dance movements and formation arrangements strictly adhering to traditional Nuo rituals.

This makes it a typical embodiment of “ritualized freehand brushwork” in traditional performing arts. From the perspective of action design, the footwork of Pingxiang to play Nuo Shen was born from the “witch dance” and “Yu step”, with the southeast, northwest, and middle as the basic orientation, with “close dancing, small whirlwind alternation” as the distinctive feature. Bow down and change your shiny shell, sway your upper body and feet steadily. Dance with your hands on your chest and knees in front of you, and take half a step with your knees flat. The strong beat stands strong and the weak beat, and the horizontal and beveled angles are interspersed with rows, which accurately summarizes the stylized characteristics of its movements. Through the adjustment of body posture, the core symbol of Nuo face is fully displayed to achieve “conveying the spirit through form”. The amplitude control of the chest and knee dance of both hands not only avoids the redundancy of body language, but also conveys the solemnity of the ceremony through regular movements. Only by moving the actor's orientation can freehand space be constructed.

In addition, each routine of Pingxiang Nuo God Performance incorporates eight core movements: leaping, stepping back, treading, flipping, turning,

spinning, swinging, and swaying, paired with over twenty varied drumbeat patterns and rhythmic notations. The sequence of actions is rigorous yet not cumbersome, and the range of treading movements is expansive yet precise. This not only embodies the ritual significance of “treading on evil spirits” but also maintains aesthetic restraint through controlled movement amplitude, aligning with the moderation principle of Zhonghe aesthetics. Even in intense performance scenes where actors wield swords, axes, knives, and other weapons, their movements are bold and fierce yet remain orderly. There are no excessive physical conflicts; instead, stylized martial arts movements are used to convey the belief that justice prevails over evil. In this way, it achieves the freehand effect of expressing complex ritual meanings through simple, refined movements. The streamlined body language evolved from the “witch dance” carries the multiple cultural meanings of dispelling the epidemic and praying for blessings, allowing the viewer to understand the ritual spirit and cultural beliefs behind the action viewing (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Pingxiang Nuo God performance.

Japanese Noh Opera: Emotional transmission of refined programs

Japanese Noh Opera deeply integrates “ashibyōshi” (foot rhythm), “shitegata” (hand gestures), and “megane” (eye movements). These three elements echo and complement each other, jointly conveying intricate emotions and philosophical ideas through a “simple” artistic form. In doing so, Noh ultimately achieves its aesthetic pursuit of “freehand expression”. Noh master Shiomi put forward the aesthetic concept of “flowers” in *The Book of Flowers*, emphasizing that “the beauty of

action is not complicated, but the true meaning is seen in the subtleties”, which is fully presented through the synergy of the three [15].

In the Noh play “Well”, the heroine - who perishes from grief over her lover’s death - moves slowly across the dark stage. She first establishes the emotional tone through ashibyōshi (foot rhythm), which is nearly one-third slower than usual; the soles of her feet touch the stage first, then exert force gradually, with almost no sound. This movement embodies the heaviness and illusion of a soul wandering in the mortal world, while her lingering longing for the past is hidden in each dragging step. In the Noh Opera “Anvil”, when the Weaver Girl misses the Cowherd, she holds her hands lightly on her chest, her thumb and index finger are slightly separated, and then slowly lifted. The light grip symbolizes the cherishing of love. The differential between the finger’s hints at the regret of separation, and slowly conveys the feeling of looking back. The whole set of movements is unnecessary swinging, and only the millimeter-level adjustment of the fingers and arms and wrists concretize the thoughts and expectations.

As the final touch to emotional expression in Noh performance, the actor’s gaze passes through the hollowed eye openings of the Noh mask. The eyes remain half-lidded, with pupils slightly constricted to reduce light reflection - neither staring straight ahead nor fully closed. This gaze expresses a reluctant parting from the mortal world, echoing the slowness of the footwork and the subtle trembling of the hands. With the synergy of the three, the audience can clearly understand the role without the need for line explanation. The foot rhythm conveys the illusion of earthly existence, the hand gestures carry the weight of lingering obsession, and the gaze reveals inner hesitation. Together, they build a freehand expressive space that channels the intricate mix of loneliness and longing. In this way, these complex emotions transcend physical movements and strike a deep chord in the heart of the viewer.

Noh theorist Yushin Imamichi pointed out in *Oriental Aesthetics* that “the simplicity of Noh movement is to allow the viewer to focus on the extension of ‘meaning’”. A subtle hand movement may trigger thinking about the impermanence of life more than a violent physical

altercation. The synergy of foot rhythm, hand gestures, and eye movements creates layered, extended meaning - not a mere stacking of individual actions. Foot rhythm sets the emotional tone, hand gestures shape the emotional expression, and the gaze provides the final emotional touch. This synergy is not only the ultimate application of the artistic technique of conveying complexity through simplicity. It also enables Noh to carry profound emotions and philosophical thoughts with a minimalist artistic language under the framework of mono no aware aesthetics, becoming a unique existence in traditional East Asian freehand art [16].

To sum up, whether it is Chinese Nuo Opera or Japanese Noh Opera, both take stylization achieved by substituting simplicity for complexity as their path. They break through the limitations of realism, shifting artistic expression from the reproduction of reality to the transmission of spirit, which reflects their shared pursuit of freehand expression. This is also an important reason why Nuo Opera and Noh Opera can form cross-cultural resonance in the essence of art despite their different cultural backgrounds.

Conclusion

Through an in-depth comparison of the aesthetic characteristics of Chinese Nuo Opera and Japanese Noh Opera, it can be seen that they both developed in the rich context of oriental culture. Both theatrical forms have expressive aesthetic characteristics and comprehensive artistic attributes. These similarities give Chinese Nuo Opera and Japanese Noh Opera stylized structural characteristics and virtual performance skills, thus fully demonstrating the artistic style of oriental drama. Chinese Nuo Opera has exerted a significant influence on Japanese Noh Opera in performing arts, rituals, and religious culture. The aesthetic ideals of artistic conception and neutrality have also shaped the inner emotional expression and aesthetic pursuit of Japanese Noh. Although the two forms of theater have different cultural roots, both are committed to evoking emotional resonance and thinking in audiences through art. Through a comparative analysis of the aesthetic characteristics of Chinese Nuo Opera and Japanese Noh Opera, this paper enriches our understanding of these art forms. It also reveals the exchanges and interactions in culture and aesthetics between China and Japan since ancient times. Despite this, Nuo Opera and Noh Opera

still show their own personalities in commonality, revealing differences in similarities. By exploring the similarities and differences between them, it helps us gain a deeper understanding of the essence of these two theatrical arts, as well as their unique status and value in Eastern culture.

Funding

This work was not supported by any funds.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to show sincere thanks to those techniques who have contributed to this research.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Malm, W. P. (2020) The musical characteristics and practice of the Japanese Noh drama in an East Asian context. *The University of Michigan Center for Chinese Studies*, 99.
- [2] Cheng, Z., Tian, Y., Zhang, Q. (2024) Gene extraction and design transformation of Nuo culture from the Perspective of Memetics: a case study of Gan Nuo masks. *Asia-pacific Journal of Convergent Research Interchange (APJCRI)*, 599-616.
- [3] Piao, E. (2025) A comparative study of participants in Korean and Chinese Nuo rituals. *Religions*, 16(12), 1557.
- [4] Guo, Y. (2021) Iconographic volatility in the Fuxi-Nüwa triads of the Han Dynasty. *Archives of Asian Art*, 71(1), 63-91.
- [5] Yang, L. M. (2023) Four gods as a dual symbol: apotropaic and political significance. *The Four Gods Figurines as Tomb Guardians: Their Function, Circulation, and Disappearance in Tang China (618-907 AD)*, 33-79.
- [6] Chen, Y., Khochprasert, J., Suvimolstien, C. (2024) Evolutionary features, content characteristics, and inheritance strategies: a study on Nanfeng Nuo dance. *Journal of Fine Arts*, 12(2), 145-174.
- [7] Beaman, P. L. (2021) Dancing Noh and Kabuki in Japanese Shakespeare productions. *Dance Chronicle*, 44(2), 106-132.
- [8] Chen, J. (2024) Aesthetic value and cultural philosophy in opera: a cross-era perspective.

- Cultura: International Journal of Philosophy of Culture and Axiology*, 21(3), 376-394.
- [9] Chen, Y., Suvimolstien, C., Khochprasert, J. (2025) A study on the cultural connotations and heritage development of nanfeng nuo dance masks. *International Journal of Sociologies and Anthropologies Science Reviews*, 5(1), 853-864.
- [10] Wang, Y., Bi, W., Liu, X., Wang, S. (2024) Exploring the inheritance and innovation of visual symbols in Chizhou Nuo Opera from the perspective of visual design: a study from historical expression to cultural and creative products. *Transnational Marketing Journal*, 12(1), 55-71.
- [11] Saito, Y. (2017) The ethical dimensions of aesthetic engagement. *Espes*, 6(2), 19-29.
- [12] Stehlíková, T., Vaghi, K. (2024) Experiencing the infra-ordinary: the power of imaginative spaces. *Theatralia*, 27(1), 112.
- [13] Liu, F. (2022) Integration of Chinese traditional graphic art and western art from the perspective of spirit, harmonious, and art. *Psychiatria Danubina*, 34(5), 85-85.
- [14] Okamoto-MacPhail, A. (2023) Interacting signs in the Genji scrolls. *The Pictured Word: Word & Image Interactions*, 2, 12, 273.
- [15] Matsumoto-Sturt, Y. (2024) From Noh plays to modern anime: the role of peony flowers in Japanese cultural imagery. *Synergy*, 20(1), 23-36.
- [16] Matsunobu, K. (2016) Conforming the body, cultivating individuality: intercultural understandings of Japanese Noh. *The Routledge International Handbook of Intercultural Arts Research*, 138-147.