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From the Perspective of Civilizational Mutual Learning: From Civilizational Ecology to Global Dialogue—A Review of *An Essay on the History of Eastern Drama*

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Abstract: Edited by Meng Zhaoyi, *An Essay on the History and Theory of Oriental Drama* not only fills the gap in the general history of Oriental drama but also, from a groundbreaking perspective, accomplishes a knowledge - based practice that promotes global civilizational dialogue. Based on the contemporary context of cross - civilizational learning, this paper analyzes the contributions of this book from three dimensions. Firstly, it constructs an overall picture of the “Oriental drama civilization ecosystem”, breaking through the research paradigm centered on nation - states and truly presenting to people the landscape of cross - cultural drama flow in history. Secondly, it advocates the methodology of “internal interpretation”, laying a theoretical foundation for the equal dialogue of cultural subjectivity. Thirdly, it conducts a systematic analysis of the modern transformation of Oriental drama, presenting three paths for modernization. The research reveals that this work not only outlines the overall picture of Oriental drama but also provides a paradigm of cross - civilizational learning through equal dialogue, which has significant theoretical value and practical implications for writing the global

art history in the context of a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind.

Keywords: Oriental Drama; Cross-civilizational Learning; Civilization Ecosystem; Internal Interpretation; Modern Transformation

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标题: 文明互鉴视野：文明生态到全球对话——评《东方戏剧史论稿》

摘要: 孟昭毅主编的《东方戏剧史论稿》不仅填补了东方戏剧通史的空白，更以突破性的视角完成了一次推动全球文明对话的知识实践。本文立足于文明互鉴的时代背景，从三个维度剖析该书的所具有的贡献：一是构建“东方戏剧文明生态”的整体图景，突破以民族国家为单位的研究范式，真实地向人们展现了历史上跨文化戏剧流动的景观；二是倡导“内部阐释”的方法论，为文化主体性的平等对话奠定理论基础；三是对东方戏剧现代化转型进行梳理分析，展现出塑造现代化的三条路径。研究发现，这部著作不仅梳理了东方戏剧的整体图景，更提供了一种平等对话的文明互鉴范式，对在人类命运共同体背景下的全球艺术史书写有重要的理论价值和实践启示。

关键词: 东方戏剧；文明互鉴；文明生态；内部阐释；现代化转型

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Professor Meng Zhaoyi edited the book “*An Essay on the History and Theory of Oriental Drama*”, which was published by Line-Press Publishing House in 2025. This book mainly explores and explains the overall development process and unique aesthetic features of Eastern drama in a systematic way. The whole book has two volumes, and it is divided into four parts in structure: preface, middle part, latter part and supplementary part. The preface includes four chapters, which cover the origin of Eastern drama, the early emergence of Indian Sanskrit drama, the development course of drama in West Asia and North Africa, and the initial formation of Eastern drama in the classical period. The middle part has five chapters, which focus on the research of modern Eastern drama. It includes the maturity of Eastern drama, the performance forms of Southeast Asian drama, the traditional drama art of South Asia, and the changes of drama in West Asia and North Africa. The latter part has four chapters, which turns to the research of modern and contemporary times. It analyzes the prosperity of Eastern drama and the development of diverse aesthetics, and pays special attention to issues such as the modern changes of Eastern drama, the revival of Eastern drama in East Asia, the charm of South Asian drama, and the development of drama in West Asia and North Africa. The supplementary part consists of seven chapters, conducting in-depth research from a theoretical perspective,

covering the aesthetic theories of Eastern tragedy and comedy, the development of realistic drama, the foundation of script drama aesthetics, the cognition of the role of “I am not I”, the aesthetic psychology and aesthetic feelings of the audience, and the trend of Eastern drama going global, etc.

From the content of the entire book, it can be seen that this work always revolves around a core issue - in today's globalization, how can the artistic traditions of different civilizations rely on their own discourse systems to achieve effective expression and truly engage in equal dialogue. This article will start from the construction of the civilization ecosystem, the basis of internal interpretation dialogue, and the practical exploration of diversified modernization, to conduct in-depth research on this. The sorting out of this series of issues can not only highlight the unique academic value of “*An Essay on the History and Theory of Oriental Drama*”, but also help us think about how to transcend cultural opposition and move towards mutual learning and exchange among different civilizations in the current era. At the same time, it is necessary to objectively recognize that as a grand regional drama history, this book still has certain limitations and room for improvement in balancing the breadth and depth of research, overly idealized research perspectives, and relatively single research methods. This also provides certain directions and references for subsequent scholars' research on Eastern drama.

1. Foundation: The Construction of Civilizational Ecology

“The Eastern Drama Cultural Ecology” is one of the most prominent theories in “*An Essay on the History and Theory of Oriental Drama*”. The essence of this theory lies in breaking through the fragmented limitations of traditional research and studying the development process of Eastern drama from a holistic and interrelated perspective. It holds that the Eastern world should be an organic whole, and there are always certain inherent connections between regional dramas, rather than equating Eastern drama with the simple combination of the drama forms of countries and regions such as China, India, and Japan. This point is also reflected in Zheng Chuanyin's (2004) work, where he approached from a cultural perspective and explored the influence of classical Chinese opera on the three major cultural sectors of folk customs, Confucianism, and religion. However, his research was relatively single, focusing only on the field of Chinese opera, while “*An Essay on the History and Theory of Oriental Drama*” has a broader vision, covering the entire field of Eastern drama, truly achieving a leap from the local to the overall.

Most existing studies are based on the national level and inevitably are influenced by national factors, making it difficult to reflect the overall characteristics of Eastern drama. While Li Qiang (2019), Li Qiang (2023), and Zheng Chuanyin (2007) and others believe that the forms of drama and its aesthetic elements flow along trade routes, religions, or imperial territories. “*An Essay on the History and Theory of Oriental Drama*” also keenly realized this and consciously placed the drama phenomena back into their original, more fluid

historical context for research. For example, the book delves deeply into the aesthetic theory of Indian classical Sanskrit drama. “*The Dance Theory*” is a classic theoretical work on Indian classical Sanskrit drama, systematically explaining the core “taste” theory, that is, through specific performance procedures, to stimulate the nine basic aesthetic emotions that the audience possesses. This theory gradually spread outward with the spread of Buddhism, having a profound and lasting impact on the drama concepts in Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and East Asia. The transformed texts found in Dunhuang, China, have traces of the “taste” theory in their narrative styles and emotional expressions. In later Chinese operas, their aesthetic pursuits — such as “moving people with emotion” and “having endless charm” — also show an indirect connection with the “taste” aesthetics of Indian Sanskrit drama. These phenomena all provide strong evidence that Eastern drama has always been in a process of constant exchange and mutual learning. They also challenge the wrong view that cultural exchanges can only happen when the West is dominant.

We should note that “Eastern Drama Cultural Ecology” has two main aspects: overallity and interrelation, along with another deep meaning — the differences within these interrelations. Wu Xiaohong (2025) studied the image spectrum of the “Brahmanda War Chronicle” in Indonesia’s Java-Bali region. She pointed out that after Indian epics were introduced to Southeast Asia, they were modified locally and combined with the unique traditional drama narratives. This shows that the Eastern drama cultural ecology has a clear feature of both interrelation and coexisting differences. In addition, the book clearly states that Eastern drama is not a uniform whole. Drama arts in different regions have their own distinct characteristics. Chinese opera uses free and virtual images to show expressiveness, and its artistic images are mainly shaped through the stylized performances of singing, speaking, acting and fighting. Indian drama is marked by passion and ritual, and its performance is full of strong religious colors and rich symbolic meanings. Japanese Noh drama has a quiet and empty aesthetic style. Its external features include slow body movements, simple chorus forms and masks without expressions, which are used to create a transcendent aesthetic state. These obvious differences directly show the diversity of Eastern drama. This diversity is not an isolated result; it is based on the interrelation between various drama forms. This fully proves that the development of each Eastern civilization has always been a process of learning from each other while keeping its own independent development.

So, the construction of “civilization ecology” not only provides a wider time and space framework for the study of Eastern drama, but also shows the world a diverse and harmonious artistic world where different cultures coexist. Every country’s traditional culture has its own uniqueness and irreplaceable role and value. But because of historical factors, the cultures of different countries and ethnic groups can interact and learn from each other. This helps break the idea of civilizational conflicts and provides a solid theoretical basis for promoting global civilizational dialogue.

2. Methodology: Internal Interpretation

If the construction of “civilizational ecology” provides the space and historical foundation for mutual learning among civilizations, then the methodological approach of “internal interpretation” advocated in its works guarantees the realization of equal dialogue among civilizations.

Existing research has found that non-Western scholars often unconsciously use Western tools when studying their own theatrical cultures. Sun Huizhu (2006) mentioned that his work takes the “fourth wall” as the object of analysis, integrates Western tools such as narratology, structural-deconstruction theory, and human performance studies, and then draws on Western classic drama theories to study the structure and deconstruction of drama. Chen Shixiong (2003) also mentioned that his work is based on the framework of the three-element model of comparative drama studies, integrates Western drama theories such as Stanislavsky’s experiential school, Brecht’s narrative drama, and “disruptive effect”, and explores the localization and creative transformation of Western drama theories. Undoubtedly, these studies have to some extent promoted the development of local drama research, but at the same time, they also bring about some problems. When people are accustomed to thinking with Western tools, the rich conceptual resources and theories of the local culture may be marginalized and forgotten, thus losing the initiative in cultural interpretation of the local culture. Therefore, the insistence on “internal interpretation” in *An Essay on the History and Theory of Oriental Drama* is to seek a remedy. It strives to explain the phenomena and values of a culture or artistic tradition from the concepts, theories, critical discourse, and philosophical background generated by that culture or artistic tradition itself. This is precisely the right prescription.

When analyzing Chinese opera, this book does not rush to introduce Brecht’s “disruptive effect” theory to explain the hypothetical nature of its performance, but instead first returns to the cultural tradition context and inherent theoretical resources of China. The book systematically sorts out the ideological development trajectory from “The Book of Music” to various ancient opera theories, and closely links opera aesthetics with local ideological and artistic concepts, covering both Confucian “harmony” ethical view and traditional painting and calligraphy “vividness of spirit” artistic propositions, ultimately forming a set of systematic and localized opera aesthetics interpretation system. This interpretation based on local cultural resources enables Chinese opera to go beyond the superficial description of artistic style and rise to an artistic system rooted in profound philosophical heritage and aesthetic tradition, fully demonstrating the unique value of Chinese opera.

Through the above elaboration, we recognize that the “expressive” spirit of Chinese opera, the “mysterious and profound” artistic conception pursued by Japanese bunraku, and the “taste” theory thought upon which Indian drama is based, when fully separated from their respective cultural origins and deeply interpreted, have broken free from previous cognitive limitations. They are no longer vague sensory cognition or remain at the superficial description of exoticism, but become theories that can engage in equal dialogue

with Western concepts such as “disruption”. Thus, “internal interpretation” is not a move towards cultural isolationism; on the contrary, it is a necessary prerequisite for achieving true equality and in-depth dialogue. Only when the artistic traditions of all civilizations have acquired a solid ability for self-interpretation and self-definition can they participate in the dialogue and co-construction of global culture as independent and confident subjects, achieving true equality dialogue between both sides.

3. Practice: Pluralistic Modernization

The book further extends its research scope to the contemporary era, not stopping at the review of the glorious past of Eastern drama, nor being confined to the call for establishing equal discourse. Instead, through a large number of case analyses, it systematically outlines three core paths of the modern transformation of Eastern drama, namely, the innovation of traditions, the integration of tradition and modernity, and the contemporary internationalization interpretation of traditional aesthetics.

The first path is traditional innovation. Some opera artists with progressive ideas and innovative awareness tried to reform Peking Opera’s content and performance forms to fit modern audiences’ aesthetic needs. The second path is the combination of tradition and modernity. In the Indian drama circle, groups like playwrights and directors successfully mixed the social critical function of Western realistic drama with the performance forms and narrative traditions of Indian folk drama and Sanskrit drama. They created dramas that have local cultural characteristics and directly reflect modern Indian social issues, which helps traditional drama have in-depth communication with modern society. The third path is the contemporary international interpretation of traditional aesthetics. More and more Eastern drama directors have made innovative expressions by combining contemporary drama concepts on the basis of Eastern traditional aesthetics, which fully shows the contemporary value and meaning of Eastern drama aesthetics. The book takes Chinese director Lin Zhaohua as an example. It points out that he broke the limitations of Western drama and bravely used a special technique: letting actors walk out of the audience seats directly and having some actors perform on the empty ground in the audience area, which made the performance have a unique style. Lin Zhaohua is a pioneering director in Chinese drama, who is good at breaking traditional norms and carrying out experimental creations. At the same time, the book also takes “Mayor Chen Yi” as an example. It describes that at the beginning of the whole play, the drama uses a fictional stage time and space environment and the overlap of real and actual environments in its artistic design. This design directly draws the audience into the theater and allows them to interact with the actors. These practices make full use of the “stage” function in Eastern drama performances, letting the audience have a good aesthetic experience. These practices are not just a static display of tradition. Instead, they require people to innovate while retaining the traditional beauty of drama, which shows the strong vitality of Eastern drama art.

Therefore, “*An Essay on the History and Theory of Oriental Drama*” powerfully argues that: Facing the modernization wave, the tradition of Eastern drama has not died out but has instead received opportunities. The exploration of modern Eastern drama provides a path deeply rooted in its own traditional aesthetic concepts and based on this to absorb modern thoughts and technologies, expressing contemporary concerns. It does not necessarily lead to extreme individualism, but may rebuild the sense of community, connect the ancient and modern spirits, and reconcile the relationship between body and mind in the artistic way of modern society’s exploration. In summary, the present representation of Eastern drama makes the global modern drama cultural map more colorful, rather than monochromatic. This is the most fruitful manifestation of mutual learning among civilizations: The purpose of mutual learning is not to converge, but to inspire each other in mutual inspiration, making the artistic traditions of each civilization more distinctive, while jointly expanding the boundaries of human art.

4. Research Limitations and Reflections

What needs to be viewed dialectically is that, influenced by the grand narrative, there are still obvious limitations in the research on the diverse modernization practices and the overall research in this book. These are mainly reflected in three aspects: First, the breadth and depth of regional drama research are uneven. The focus is mainly on studying mainstream dramas such as Chinese opera in East Asia, Indian Sanskrit drama in South Asia, and Noh drama in Japan. The research on dramas in regions like West Asia and North Africa is insufficient, making it difficult to fully present the diversified appearance of Eastern dramas. Second, the research perspective is overly idealized. It focuses on sorting out the successful experiences and paths of modernization transformation, but neglects the difficulties and challenges that traditional dramas face during the process of modernization transformation. Third, the research methods are single. This book mainly relies on traditional document research, historical argumentation, and theoretical interpretation, without integrating diverse research methods such as field investigation and stage empirical evidence. This is highly consistent with the research limitations revealed by Timmerman (2017) in his study of modern drama in Indonesia. Of course, these limitations do not negate the core value of this book; instead, they point out the direction for subsequent scholars to conduct research on Eastern drama.

By analyzing the three levels of “civilization ecology” construction, “internal interpretation” methods, and “diverse modernization” practice, we can clearly see that the contribution of the work “*An Essay on the History and Theory of Oriental Drama*” is specifically manifested as follows: Firstly, the world drama history will shift from a one-way traditional narrative model to a multi-centered model of mutual communication and mutual learning. There are various forms of drama in the world, such as ancient Greek tragedies, Chinese opera, Indian Sanskrit drama, Japanese Noh, etc. There is no distinction of advanced and backward, nor is

there a definition of center and periphery among them. The core is the coexistence of differences and equal dialogue. The historical narrative will shift from “the global dissemination and influence of Western drama” to “the parallel development and complex interaction of multiple regional drama traditions”; Secondly, drama theory will be greatly enriched, moving from a Western-centered perspective to a diversified and complementary one; Finally, the future creation of drama will burst with new vitality in the tension of global localization. Future drama innovation is likely to no longer come from the simple inheritance of a certain tradition, but from the deep understanding, creative transformation, and organic integration of different drama cultural genes. Artists are both global in nature, deeply understanding the diverse heritage of human drama; and local in nature, rooted in their most familiar cultural soil and contemporary reality. What they create will be a “new tradition” that can be understood by local audiences and also able to communicate with the world.

Overall, “*An Essay on the History and Theory of Oriental Drama*” breaks through the Western-centered narrative model through civilization ecology construction and internal interpretation, and reconstructs the academic discourse power of Eastern drama. However, objectively speaking, this book also has problems such as uneven breadth and depth in regional drama research, overly idealized research perspectives, and single research methods. In the current context of building a community of shared future for mankind, the exchange and mutual learning among civilizations are more important and complex than ever before. How to avoid the trap of civilization conflicts and move towards the path of co-prosperity of civilizations. “*An Essay on the History and Theory of Oriental Drama*” provides an answer: Firstly, with the method of in-depth “internal interpretation”, establish each culture’s own cultural subjectivity; Secondly, with the historical perspective of “civilization ecology” as the basis, establish a mutual understanding foundation; Thirdly, with the belief in the openness of “diverse modernity” as the support, stimulate creative future transformation. This path not only has guiding significance for the rewriting of drama history, but also provides valuable wisdom inspiration for us to think about broader cultural coexistence and promote the common prosperity of human spirit. And the future research on Eastern drama can, on the basis of this book, improve its limitations and deficiencies, making the research on Eastern drama more complete, objective, and contemporary.

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