

Plastic Arts of Northern Sichuan Big Puppets

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Abstract

As one of China's first non-material cultural heritages, northern Sichuan big puppets are mainly characterized by three aspects in the plastic arts: the first is the focus on combination of romanticism and realism in modeling techniques; the second is the true and delicate art of makeup, and makeup makes adjustments with the changes in the plot and the fluctuating mentality of characters; the third is flexible and diverse installation and clothing. Northern Sichuan big puppets should be closer to the era, make seasonal innovation, integrate into the cultural elements of the times and agree with the with the aesthetic taste of modern people, in order to maintain long-term vitality.

Keywords: Northern Sichuan big puppets ; modelling; art

As a artistic style of strong simulation, puppet show began in the Han Dynasty, prospered in the Tang Dynasty and thrived in the Song Dynasty. It was contained in the chapter "Folklore" in Volume 5 of "Beautiful Dream to Tokyo" by Meng Veteran that popular folk puppet plays then included "suspensors puppet" and "flesh puppet" and it was said that "zaju play: rod puppet served as mistress; the first show of small zaju play was performed at the five watches of the night, which could not be seen if late; suspensors puppet, Zhang Jinxian, Li Waining; flesh puppet: Zhang Zhenmiao, Wen Nuge, Zhen Geqiang, Mo Boji and Xiao Diaodao. "¹ Nevertheless, performance skills and performance program of these three puppet plays were not elaborated. On the histrionic theme of puppet shows, it was said in "Notes of the Chief Sights in the Capital· All Dancers in Vacherie": "play suspensors puppet, rod puppet, water puppet and yao-fa puppet. All puppets elaborated and expounded ghost's seducing man and cavalry buddhist case. Their scripts for

story-telling were like dramas or like yaci, probably more virtual and less real, as was Mighty Miracle God Zhuji big fairy as well. " ² It was thus clear that puppet plays had been developed to be highly sophisticated and completed till Song Dynasty; they not only played at long saga, but also had fixed dramas - scripts for story-telling, with emphasis on god-ghost in the subject. Puppet plays in Ming Dynasty had been popular throughout the country, and puppet show in Jiangnan areas with prosperous economy and a large number of migrants had been more prosperous. Therefore, there was a saying of "tendency to puppets in south". Puppet show after the Qing Dynasty had come into being in full glory; it not only had an increasingly wider popular range, but had ever-increasing dramaturgic tunes. Branches appeared, including puppet show in western Liaoning, glove puppet show in Zhangzhou, stringed puppet show in Quanzhou, glove puppet show in Jinjiang, glove puppet show in Shaoyang, puppet show in Gaozhou, iron-rod puppet show in Chaozhou, big puppet show in northern Sichuan, stringed puppet show in Heyang, Yao-Fa puppet show in Taishun and Lingao people puppet show, etc. On distinction between traditional Chinese opera and puppet show, Ren Bantang said in "Tang Xinong" that: "Drama is man-made show, anthropocentric metaphors; puppet is show about objects, material metaphors." ³ It was thus clear that there was little difference between puppets in early phase and real persons in figure, and after the Yuan Dynasty, with standardization and immobilization of theatrical venues, "GouLan" and "Wasi" in the Song Dynasty were evolved to "Song House" and "Opera House" in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, developed into modern theater finally, and the giant puppets gradually fall into oblivion. Plastic arts for other types of puppets have undergone significant changes, which was namely that, in order to adapt to the needs of performance and to develop towards refinement and miniaturization, miniature, compact, sophisticated and delicate trend was also shown in the production process. Only northern Sichuan big puppets have held legacy of ancient puppets two thousand years ago, and have long been widely popular with masses, regarded as "art treasures" at home and abroad, and they have been included in one of the first batch of intangible cultural heritages in June 2006.

Because of bulk and complex and flexible operation, northern Sichuan big puppets have many places different from other puppets in the modelling. They have more complex production process than other puppets, requiring that producers have knowledge in numerous aspects, including art foundation, sculpture design, woodworking knowledge and mechanical installation, etc. Most importantly, producers are also required to have certain artistic accomplishments and modeling capabilities. In this paper, I interpret some new understanding of plastic arts of big puppets after observing and emulating performance of big puppets in field and after exchanges with entertainers. I hope that all masters can correct me for any inappropriate part.

For drama art, although modelling is a static presentation in external shape, it is also the beginning and the end of "movement" and the starting point of development and extension for "movement". The relationship between the course of action and posture attitude also reflects dialectical relationship between stillness and movement, and both together build a temporal manifestation of drama. Modelling is a material form kind existing with the action, and only after coordinating with the actions, modelling can derive infinite artistic charm. Hence, in that sense,

puppetry art is a combination of performing art and plastic art. Character modeling of northern Sichuan big puppets is a realist-based, which is characterized by taking shape from real person but beyond the real person in moulding. The so-called taking shape from real person means taking advantages of puppets in northern Sichuan in physical size to strive to achieve convergence with the real prototype, pursuing strange, unique, vivid and realistic artistic effect; the so-called beyond the real person refers to handling of non-authenticity in the five sense organs and the modelling for big puppets in most cases, so as to obtain consistent performance with the personal character. Early big puppets were rough in modelling. Yang Dai, a folk sculptor in Yuechi County during Xianfeng period, carved puppets for Lee family opera troupes. His practice is to absorb the facial makeup of Sichuan opera and also to give distinctive character of "puppet", so that large puppets greatly exceed people of the time in shape and equipping of facial features. Lee family opera troupes got famous in northern Sichuan since then. Since the foundation of the country, plastic artist of puppets in northern Sichuan Li Fahai acknowledged famous engraving artist Zou Yizhi as a teacher, learning portrait carving skills. Zou Yizhi placed great emphasis on the overall grasp of portrait bone structure, mainly focusing on realist approach in technique of expression, while Lee integrated stone carving of bas-reliefs on precipices and Western sculpture techniques on the basis of learning former worthies, thereby forming the plastic arts of soft line and strong texture for northern Sichuan big puppets. The characters were realist-based modeling, with movable eyes, eyebrows, mouth, head, ears, nose, hands, waist and joints, able to fetch and hold objects, dress and undress, wear and take off hat, wear and take off boots, blow the fire and light candles, give a flick of their sleeves and brush lightly, suddenly turn hostile and back bend, which were surprising and similar to humans, and at the same time, their skill of heroic feathers, hand fan and water sleeves were tantamount to living persons. Compared with modeling features of other puppets, puppets in northern Sichuan are mainly characterized by three aspects in plastic arts:

One is to focus on dynamic integration of romanticism and realism in modeling approach. During Ming and Qing Dynasties, temples in northern Sichuan developed rapidly. Temples held temple fair once or twice every year, called regular meeting. When the regular meeting held, there were often crowded around the temples, whereas inviting the puppet troupes for rehearsal and singing was an important part of the regular meeting. Traditional small puppets suitable for performances of family opera troupes were clearly unable to meet the entertainment needs of the public, and in order to maintain their own livelihood and income, puppet troupes inevitably eliminated puppets of smaller body and gradually enlarged puppet body, which was a direct factor contributing to the generation of northern Sichuan big puppets. Early puppet modelling in northern Sichuan was mainly drawn from the Sichuan opera, namely exhibiting features of profiling and immobilization in characters, with single stable endosarc. After the founding of New China, the traditional opera culture had made great progress under the attention and promotion of the government, and Chinese folk art forms in all places had been systematically organized and compiled. At the same time, various new forms of culture have challenged the traditional literature. Under the social environment of ever-increasing aesthetic appreciation for the audience, the original single and stable profiling modeling approach had been difficult to adapt to the reality show, which inevitably required that northern Sichuan big puppets could

not stick to original vision any more in plastic arts, but should make changes and adjustments on the basis of respect for tradition. On the one hand, head carving of northern Sichuan big puppets extruded volume, making humans' perceptual muscle authentic and plump, to construct a kind of decorative beauty with northern Sichuan flavor; on the other hand, the original profiling modelling was often abandoned in shaping characters, to performance figures through art reprocessing according to figures' life experience, social status and personality characteristics, so that the typical characteristics of the characters could be detected from the facial features of characters. In 1960s and 1970s, through assiduous exploration and efforts of Zou Yizhi, Lifa Hai, Hu Yulin and other artists, northern Sichuan big puppets made great breakthrough in the plastic arts. Firstly, they abandoned the traditional wood materials but used clay sculpture births to make head portraits, solving the problem of difficult wood processing; secondly, they had broadened themes of the puppet show. Traditional large puppets only performed costume drama, but after improved, they could both performed costume drama but also modern drama, so that opera themes could be extended from ancient to modern themes, creating a group of modern characters loved by people, such as cunning brutal Zuo Shandiao, brave Zirong, valiant female militia, hard-working and kind female pig breeder and so on. Modeling artists both retained and broke through facial makeup art of puppets. Reservations were to inherit the shape and color of traditional facial makeup, while breakthroughs were to exaggerate a part of the face based on different identities and personalities of characters, and then by stylized and standardized deformation and even colored drawing of impressionistic style, to transcend traditional facial makeup in certain aspects. For instance, facial makeup process of Xu Jia in "Kneeling Before Door Grazing" could indicate the issue, and to perform characters of treachery and adulation in Xu Jia, the play also intended to conduct anamorphic and exaggerated processing of facial features while retaining the traditional facial makeup at the same time, which both left a deep impression to the audience, but also made great satire on Xu Jia's human frailties of imperiousness and arrogance. Other example included lotus fairy in "Jade Lotus", and rabbit fairy, bamboo fairy and butterfly fairy etc. in "Guan Yin Shou", which were served with light dance based on fully absorbing the characteristics of clowns in the traditional opera, creating a very dreamy wonderland. Negative people like ministry councillors, family retainers and housekeepers in the play were written or painted realistically, with modeling approach of combined realism and exaggeration, to make stage effects coordinated and harmonious in sharp contrast, welcomed by the audience.

Secondly, art of makeup was real and delicate, and makeup made corresponding adjustments with the changes in plot and the fluctuating mentality of characters. Traditional puppets mainly used tar makeup, but used paint makeup after the founding of China, which was characterized by easy to save and not ready colour fading. But the disadvantage was also obvious, that is, the paint makeup was reflected light in the face under the effect of strong light, which tended to affect the stage effects. After 1980s, puppets in northern Sichuan used oil paint makeup, regardless of gloss oil or paint makeup, possible to eliminate reflections through artists' special treatment, greatly enhancing the puppet sensuality and texture, so that characters would look like a live one. Furthermore, since the color was more gorgeous and gaudy than that in traditional puppets, it also facilitated full characterization of people's age and personality. Puppets in northern Sichuan are mostly based on realism in characters, such as the lotus fairy in "Jade Lotus", that is, to

create three story images starting from the needs of plot, while the differences of images were mainly manifested through facial make-up. In the scene of conversing with the hero Yulin in the romantic ways, Lotus Fairy was charming and lovely, while in the scene of rescuing Yulin by sacrificing herself, Lotus Fairy was righteous, confident and resolute and steadfast. At the end of the play, the wicked were punished, Lotus Lake resumed calmness, gathering fragrant flowers, with green ripples melodious flute, when Yulin and all fairies sang happily and danced lightly at the lakeshore, Lotus Fairy looked elegant and lifelike. The stylist was good at changing makeup of puppets in accordance with propulsion and needs puppet of the plot; on the one hand, this made puppets modeling seamlessly fit with the plot development; on the other hand, this relieved the pressure on the audience's vision, diverting the audience's attention to the development of the plot to get new fresh live viewing experience. Another example was the actor Yulin's kind, honest, upright and robust character, which was mainly demonstrated through facial makeup. Thus, in terms of the character make-up, northern Sichuan big puppets made a clever fusion of traditional techniques of Chinese painting, Chinese classical drama theory and life-based skills of drama in modern times, casting figures' emotions of pleasure, anger, sorrow and joy in the complex plots, to reflect the exquisite and real features.

The third was flexibility and diversification in equipping and clothing. Big puppets in northern Sichuan belonged to rod puppets, generally about 1.5 meters tall, figures complying with human anatomy proportions, with vivid facial expressions and limber eyes, ears, mouth and nose. The visual image resembled a real person, exquisitely made props of crown, clothing and utensils. Performances were beautiful, clean, rough and delicate, accompanied by abundant material performances, such as dressing and undressing, flick of sleeves and dusting, fire blow and candle lighting, smoking and tea drinking, back bend and kowtow, skill for musical instruments, sword brandish, split kick and somersault, etc., together with the performance of human and puppets at the same stage, which could have adulterate artistic effects. Northern Sichuan big puppets could also zoom in on a part of the body or even highlight certain body movements, similar to film close-up, in order to show the characters' inner activities. Beautiful shape, charm in affection transmission, beautiful melodies, smart moves and bizarre special effects formed unique artistic characteristics of northern Sichuan big puppets. Early large puppets were simple in the installation, and only faces of clowns and painted role had activity instrument, while other roles were lacking in facial expressions and movements. In the 1960s, folk artist Li Fahai made a great reform in terms of flexibility for puppets' facial features, making puppets' eyes, ears, mouth and nose able to produce many actions with the need of performance under the action of the spring, which added greatly to the beauty of large puppet show. In addition to the five sense organs, puppet artists took advantage of the principles of anatomy of animals and various mechanical structures to design a variety of puppet construction in equipping of puppet's neck, torso, arms, waist, etc., making big puppets become vivid, movable and flexible performance entities. Thus, a qualified puppet artist shall not only master the modeling knowledge in sculpture, but also understand mechanical drawing, proficient in basic skills of riveting, welding, planing and clamp; knowledge in body sculpture, mechanical design and mechanical production at the same time can create puppet modelling that meet the performance needs. Traditional northern Sichuan big puppets have mainly followed Sichuan opera style in modeling of furnishings, taking palace clothing in the Ming and Qing dynasties as basic apparel

style, then making changes once again according to features of figures on this basis. Although large puppets differ little from ordinary people in the shape, the puppets shall not wear clothing of ordinary people. In addition to adapting to the requirements of puppet show, they must also dress more splendid and eye-catching than the common people, in order to fully demonstrate the costume requirements of puppet show as Chinese opera. Hence, they pay attention to grand ornate color of costumes and beautiful diverse forms of costumes, highlighting the revealing brightness in dress style and emphasizing harmonization in clothing match. For instance, as for traditional repertoire "Monkey Subdues White-Skeleton Demon", the play primarily refers to Dunhuang frescoes in the Tang Dynasty in the style in the pursuit of flowery and magnificent costumes. In addition, the color of character costumes is often able to demonstrate the identity and personality of the character. For instance, Tang Monk wears a yellow cassock to show solemnity, also a symbol of his social status in the play; Pig wears black clothing, which is in line with his simple, honest and careless character qualities; White-Skeleton Demon wears white clothing to highlight the cunning and deceitful image. It is thus clear that color styles of character clothing are in the service of characters.

Northern Sichuan big puppets have inherited the ancient art of puppetry, and the charm, especially uniqueness and distinctiveness of the ancient puppetry art can be detected from characteristics of their performances and themselves, making that protection and heritage of northern Sichuan big puppets is particularly important. In addition, northern Sichuan big puppets have unique style of northern Sichuan in singing tune, music, performance and modeling, which has been praised by domestic and foreign counterparts and the audience, with high value of dramaturgy and culturology. Inheritance of Northern Sichuan big puppets has continued the way of oral teaching that inspires true understanding within and provided important references for ways and means of cultural heritage. Puppet artists in past dynasties have continued improvement and innovation of singing performances, materials of stage props and techniques, and these experiences are valuable assets for people today and future generations. However, under the impact of a series of crises such as commercial encroachment, traditional alienation, lack of funds and lack of personnel, northern Sichuan big puppets that had been selected into the list of China's first batch of intangible cultural heritages now have suffered an unprecedented embarrassment⁴ in the protection and inheritance, and their rescue and protection work is facing a series of problems, which requires multiple parties to work together to get rid of the current survival predicament. Northern Sichuan big puppets should be closer to the era, make seasonal innovations and integrate into cultural elements of the era, to better fit people's aesthetic taste, to integrate with the market, to be close to life, with more and better works created, in order to maintain long-term vitality. Of course, making innovations shall be traced to trend for natural evolvement of northern Sichuan big puppets, and inspiration and nutrients shall be drawn from the traditional cultures to maximally maintain, restore and promote traditional qualities of northern Sichuan big puppets and to enable traditional cultures to replay extraordinary splendor.

Notes:

¹ Page 461 in "Beautiful Dream to Tokyo" by Meng Veteran, Zhonghua Book Company, 2007 edition.

² Page 6 in "Notes of the Chief Sights in the Capital" by Guanyuan Nai Deweng, Twelve Kinds of Books on Lian Ting engraved by Yangzhou Poetry Bureau at Forty-Five Years in the Qing Dynasty of Kangxi Emperor, Library of Sichuan Province.

³ Page 416 in "TangXiNong" by Ren Bantang, Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 1984 edition.

⁴ Related reports shown in Zhang Liangjuan's "Dilemma facing northern Sichuan big puppets " of 2014 Edition in "Sichuan Daily" on January 18, 2010 and in Zheng Qinbao's "Northern Sichuan big puppets , guard our glorious heritage" in Xinhua Net on March 9, 2010, http://www.ccdy.cn/2010-03/09/content_335501.htm.